Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter One
4. Chapter Two
5. Chapter Three
6. Chapter Four
7. Chapter Five
8. Chapter Six
9. Chapter Seven
10. Chapter Eight
11. Chapter Nine
12. Chapter Ten
13. Chapter Eleven
14. Chapter Twelve
15. Chapter Thirteen
16. Chapter Fourteen
17. Chapter Fifteen
18. Chapter Sixteen
19. Chapter Seventeen
20. Chapter Eighteen
21. Epilogue
22. A Message
23. Fun Facts

Allegiances

[image]

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER: Shalestar - black tom with white under-belly and muzzle

DEPUTY: Hawkfeather - Long-haired tom with cream-colored fur and golden eyes

MEDICINE CAT: Aspenglow - Pale tabby she-cat with white paws and light-blue eyes

WARRIORS: Stormclaw - Dark gray tabby tom with white under-belly

Minkpelt - long-haired dark brown she-cat
Apprentice: Leafpaw

Emberheart - Dark tabby she-cat with a white front paw and orange eyes

Jaysong - White she-cat with gray points

Snowblaze - White tom with one blue and one yellow eye

Firelight - Dark red tom

Sageclaw - cream-furred she-cat with red-orange eyes
Apprentice: Fallingpaw

Mapleclaw - Golden tabby tom with orange-yellow eyes
Apprentice: Berrypaw

Mistfur - silver she-cat
Apprentice - Rabbitpaw

Ravenfoot - Reddish-brown tom with black legs and tail

APPRENTICES: Rabbitpaw - white tom with an unusual orange facial marking and tail

Fallingpaw - light brown tabby she-cat

Berrypaw - red tabby she-cat

Leafpaw - calico she-cat

QUEENS: Grasscloud - pale tabby she-cat (mother to Amberkit)

Applefall - golden-brown tabby she-cat with white underbelly and muzzle (mother to Brookkit)

Lilystream - orange and white she-cat

ELDERS: Dustscar - cream-colored tom

Twigtail - brown she-cat with a bobbed tail

Duskpelt - gray tabby she-cat

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER: Copperstar - shiny dark ginger tom

DEPUTY: Redface - reddish tom with a large scar across his face

MEDICINE CAT: Hollowstep - light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes
Apprentice: Lavenderpaw

WARRIORS: Elkheart - tan tom with dark brown points
Apprentice: Breezepaw

Pinefire - ginger she-cat with golden-orange eyes

Blackshadow - dark gray she-cat

Weaselclaw - dark tabby tom with a white under-belly

Apprentice: Siltpaw

Strikepelt - slender tabby she-cat

Beechtail - silver and white she-cat with green eyes

Wildwind - small gray tom
Apprentice: Eaglepaw

Crystalsong - silvery white she-cat with light blue eyes

APPRENTICES: Siltpaw - big black tom with amber eyes

Lavenderpaw - cream and white she-cat

Breezepaw - ginger tabby she-cat

Eaglepaw - dark tabby and white tom

QUEENS: Suncloud - golden she cat with black spots

Hailfrost - pale ginger she cat with gray eyes (mother to Creekkit)

ELDERS: Rubblefoot - gray and black tom

Marshpelt - dark tabby she-cat with green eyes

RIVERCLAN

LEADER: Crowstar - glossy black tom with yellow eyes

DEPUTY: Sootclaw - white tom with gray splotches

MEDICINE CAT: Silvershine - silvery gray she-cat
Apprentice : Larchpaw

WARRIORS: Plumwhisker - brown she-cat with dark red flecks
Apprentice: Chesnutpaw

Nettleclaw - tabby and white she-cat

Coyotefoot - light ginger tom

Iceheart - large white tom with silver specks
Apprentice: Troutpaw

Willowlight - black she-cat

Dead-eye - ginger tom with a missing eye

Boulderface - black tom with white muzzle

Slywhisker - dark gray tom with odd silvery eyes
Apprentice: Greenpaw

Carpfur - mottled brown she-cat

APPRENTICES: Greenpaw - lean tabby and white she-cat

Troutpaw - tabby tom

Chesnutpaw - golden-brown tom with yellow eyes

Larchpaw - dark gray she-cat with a white stripe down her nose

QUEENS: Minnowfoot - light tabby she-cat

Roseblaze - cream and white she-cat (mother to Iriskit and Violetkit)

Nightfire - black and orange she-cat

ELDERS: Beaverwhisker - dark tabby tom with long fangs

Whiteflower - silver she cat with white muzzle

Bigbelly - chubby orange and white tom

WINDCLAN

LEADER: Smokestar - small gray tom with white underbelly and muzzle

DEPUTY: Cherrybreeze - silver and orange tabby she-cat

MEDICINE CAT - Flamefeather - bright ginger tom with yellow eyes

WARRIORS: Longstripe - mostly white tom with black splotches

Brightfang - small orange tabby and white she-cat

Skyfall - light gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice: Swiftpaw

Heronpelt - bluish gray tom

Horseleap - brown tabby tom with large feet

Emeraldeye - tortieshell she-cat with green eyes

Fuzztail - gray tabby tom with a bushy tail

Bearclaw - massive brown tom
Apprentice: Wheatpaw

Egretflight - lean, pure white she-cat with brown feet

APPRENTICES: Swiftpaw - lanky black tom with yellow eyes

Wheatpaw - light brown tabby she-cat

QUEENS: Eveningpelt - orange she-cat

Streamclaw - silver and black she-cat

ELDERS: Fawnflower - cream-colored she cat with white-tipped tail

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

Minnie - long-haired black and white tom

Curly - black she-cat kittypet with a curled tail

Scarlet - long-haired red she-cat; a rogue

Darkcloud - black tabby tom with blue eyes

Prologue

She was born far too early.

The world was still covered in snow and ice when Brookkit came into it. Her mother, Applefall, had not been prepared.

Why? She often asked Starclan, *why couldn't she have been born just one moon later*? But if the starry cats had an answer, they did not speak it.

All the nursery queens did their best to look after the too-small kit. She was a little silver tabby, with a white underbelly. But it was too cold, and often there wasn't enough fresh kill to keep Applefall's milk flowing. So in agony she had to watch her kit slowly starve to death.

Brookkit did not know much of the world then. Her eyes were lidded shut, and her only thoughts were of the warm mass of fur that was her mother and of how hungry she was. She'd mew at her mother, begging her for milk. But Applefall would only wrap her body around her kit and nuzzle her. It was all she could do.

Hunting patrols increased, and they searched desperately for anything they could find, even if it was crow-food. One day the clan deputy, Hawkfeather, managed to uncover a mouse den deep under the snow, and brought enough mice back to keep the clan's hunger at bay for a little while.

"Applefall?"

Hawkfeather's head poked through the entrance to the nursery.

"What is it?" The golden tabby she-cat asked drowsily. "Is something wrong?"

Normally she might have been embarrassed by his presence, but hunger and worry were the only things she had been feeling lately.

"I've brought you two mice. We uncovered a den when out on a patrol today." His pale golden eyes flickered.

Applefall crawled over to where the tom had dropped the mice.

"Thank you," she murmured, then returned to her nest where her kit was sleeping.

Hawkfeather dipped his head and left the nursery.

"You'll be fine soon," the queen told her kit softly, "New-leaf *is* coming, and soon the all the streams and brooks will thaw, and prey will be plentiful. Don't you forget; new-leaf brings hope to the coldest and worst of times."

Chapter One

[image] [image]

One moon had passed since the day Hawkfeather had uncovered the mouse den. Since then the snow had melted, flowers had started growing, and prey was returning to ThunderClan's forest. Brookkit had been saved by an early new-leaf. She was now one and a half moon old. She had recovered, and now was healthy, strong, and as adventurous as any kit. Perhaps a little *too* adventurous. Her latest expedition would cause a panic among the cats of ThunderClan.

It was a normal day in the ThunderClan camp. The midday sun was beaming down upon the cats, and was making them drowsy. Applefall had left her kit in the care of a young queen named Lilystream, and had gone to share tongues with her friend, Duskpelt.

"Look over here!" Lilystream called to Brookkit. She had a long reed, taken earlier from the river. "You can practice your stalking skills!"

The kit bounded up to beautiful white and golden tabby queen.

"Let's see what you can do," Lilystream meowed, and began dragging the reed away from the little silver tabby.

Brookkit crouched low, and slowly began padding forward. She thought she was in pouncing range of the reed and lept, but Lilystream pulled it away at the last second.

"You'll have to be quicker than that, young one."

The game continued on for a good while, but the warmth of the sun was making Lilystream sleepy, and eventually she settled down near the nursery, letting the kit play with her tail. Slowly she began to nod off. Brookkit noticed this when the queen's tail stopped flicking.

"Lilystream?" She mewed, but the only reply she received was a soft snore.

A blue jay called, grabbing her attention. The idea of exploring the forest quickly flashed through her mind. *I wonder what's out there!* She began searching for a hole in the gorse barrier that surrounded the camp, trying to remain out of the sight of the other cats in the camp. After a few minutes she was about to give up when she saw the tiniest of gaps in the barrier, creating a perfect escape route for her. She slid through the hole and scrambled up the slope, stepping into a whole new world.

For a moment Brookkit stood awestruck. She looked up into the trees, goggling at how large they were.

A tinkling, gurgling sound suddenly caught her attention. Her ears twitched upon hearing this new sound, and immediately she bounded off in the direction it was coming from. She was small enough to squeeze through the brush and undergrowth without getting stuck, so she arrived at the source of the sound very quickly.

A small stream lay in front of her, creating the tinkling melody she had been hearing. Her eyes grew huge, and she inched a little closer to the water. In her fascination, she hadn't heard the desperate yowls coming from the camp.

"Where is she! Where is my kit?!" Applefall screeched at Lilystream.

"*Brookkit*!? *Brookkit where are you*?!" Others yowled, searching every corner of the camp for the little silver tabby.

Hawkfeather began to set of a search party, which consisted of himself, Applefall, Stormclaw, Jaysong, and Rabbitpaw. Shalestar was nowhere to be seen.

"If we cannot find her," Hawkfeather meowed, "then we shall come back and send another patrol out with us. Emberheart, will you prepare the second patrol in case we come back empty-pawed?"

It wasn't really a question. The dark tabby nodded and began selecting cats.

"There's a hole in the barrier!" Minkpelt exclaimed, drawing the cats attention.

The deputy rushed over to his sister to see for himself. "She must have found it and climbed out," he muttered, "Come on! We must find Brookkit before night comes!"

He bounded back over to the search patrol and lead them out of the gorse tunnel that was the camp's entryway.

"She probably hasn't gone far," he mewed, "so we will-"

"She might not have gotten far, unless she was stolen by a ShadowClan warrior!" Rabbitpaw hissed.

Hawkfeather swatted the apprentice's ear. "That is a very serious accusation, *and* a stupid one. A full-grown warrior would not have been able to fit through that hole, maybe not even an apprentice," he hissed, glaring at the young cat.

Rabbitpaw stared awkwardly at the ground, trying to avoid Hawkfeather's piercing gaze.

"*Like* I was saying," the deputy began again, "Rabbitpaw, you will search the sandy hollow. That should be simple enough for you. Stormclaw will search around the great sycamore and snakerocks, though Starclan forbid Brookkit has wandered there. Jaysong, you'll look near the Owl-tree and the stream. I myself will look in Tall-pines. Applefall, you may choose to look wherever you like. You know your kit best."

The golden she-cat said nothing. She had become strangely quiet since she had set out with the patrol.

"Let's move out," the deputy said, and he disappeared into the undergrowth.

Brookkit was having the time of her life. She had found a very shallow section of the stream with little current, and was bouncing wildly around in it. Any cat that didn't know any better would have

thought she was from Riverclan.

A mew of recognition came from behind her.

"There you are!" Cried Jaysong, who grabbed her by the scruff and pulled her out of the water.

The kit mewed in protest. Jaysong dropped her on the shore, hissing at the icy water that had soaked her coat.

"You could have froze to death!" She told the kit sternly. "And you've given everyone back at camp a good scare!"

"But I just wanted to explore the forest!" Brookkit mewed. "I didn't mean to scare anyone!" *Really, I didn't!*

Jaysong's blue gaze softened a little.

"Come on, we have to get you back and tell the others you're fine." She lifted the kit up by the scruff again and headed in the direction of the camp.

"Jaysong found Brookkit!" Lilystream yowled as she spotted the white she-cat bounding into the camp, still clutching the kit by her scruff. Immediately Lilystream and Grasscloud rushed over, taking Brookkit from Jaysong.

"We'll look after her until Applefall gets back," Grasscloud exclaimed. They began to take the kit back to the nursery.

"Someone has to tell the other members of the search party that Brookkit has been found," Emberheart meowed firmly.

"I know where each cat went," Jaysong meowed, "I can go back and tell them." She bounded out the entry tunnel again.

The atmosphere of the camp slowly started to become relaxed again. Emberheart sighed, already dreading what she was about to do, and beginning walking over to Shalestar's den under the Highrock.

"Shalestar?" She meowed, just outside the den.

There was no answer.

"Shalestar? May I come in?"

Still no answer. Emberheart pushed the lichen aside and stepped in, feeling sand under her paws. She had never been in here before. Shalestar was at the far end of the tunnel, quietly sleeping. But he was breathing too hard. The fall and rise of his stomach was abrupt, not the slow, rhythmic motion it should be.

Emberheart did not disturb him. She knew she probably should get him up. He *was* the clan leader after all. But he had few lives left now, and had been getting sick more and more frequently. Most of the warriors wanted a new leader, which is why they looked to Hawkfeather more often than Shalestar. She herself was almost like a deputy to the actual deputy. Neither Hawkfeather nor Emberheart were power-hungry, or wanted Shalestar dead. They simply didn't know what to do. Shalestar had showed no signs of retiring and becoming an elder, yet did very little for his clan.

Emberheart padded back outside and headed for Aspenglow's den. Maybe the medicine cat would have an answer by now.

"Starclan has sent me no signs nor prophecies about Shalestar, if that's what you came to talk about," said Aspenglow, her green eyes narrowing.

Emberheart nodded, slightly embarrassed.

"Even if they had, we still would have had to figure out the meaning, which is hardly ever clear."

"Someone will have to confront him," Emberheart hissed softly.

"I believe the clan will expect Hawkfeather to do so."

"They believe Hawkfeather can do anything, which isn't true. He has his weaknesses, just as any cat does. I'm not saying I'm any

better, because I'm not, but he can't do *everything* around here. I think a confrontation from a lower-ranking warrior would make much more of an impact than the deputy."

"Or perhaps one from a current non-warrior clan member," the medicine cat said, eyes glowing with intelligence.

Just at that moment a great commotion came from outside the den. Emberheart leaped out to see what the commotion was. Aspenglow followed, already knowing who had started it.

Applefall had returned along with Stormclaw, Rabbitpaw, Jaysong, and Hawkfeather. First she had rushed into the nursery to confirm that her kit was alive and well. Then she had stalked right up to Shalestar's den, bristling with fury.

"Wake up, *Shalestar*!" She screeched.

Emberheart glanced at Aspenglow. *You knew*.

The medicine cat nodded slowly and turned back to the scene.

The black tom with the white under-belly slowly sauntered out from the leader's den. He gazed solemnly at the golden queen.

"How can you?!" She spat.

"How can I what, Applefall?" Shalestar asked wearily.

"How can you stay in there and *sleep* all day when you have a clan out here to *lead* and to *look after*! How can you stay in there and not even know if a *kit*, the heart of the clan, is *missing*!" She was practically foaming at the mouth. "*How can you,* Shalestar?! I could have lost my kit today! But you don't care about anything anymore but your precious sleep! *Why* would you leave your clan like this!"

All was quiet. All cats waited for their leader's answer.

"You're right, Applefall. You always have been. I apologize for not doing this sooner."

Applefall let small hiss at his extremely casual tone. *Shouldn't he be*

ashamed?

"I shall retire to the elders den, and allow Hawkfeather to take over. He has served you far better than me. I shall journey to the Highstones tomorrow night, and give up my duty of leadership. Does this please you, Applefall?"

"Yes Shalestar, it *does*." There was still a trace of venom in her voice.

"Then it shall be so."

The camp was filled with both awkward and relieved silence as the clan leader padded back into his den. Then almost every cat began to meow at once.

"He's finally done it!" One warrior exclaimed.

"I can't believe it!"

"Congratulations Hawkfeather!"

But the ThunderClan deputy had disappeared in the commotion, wanting a little peace before he faced the clan as their leader. Applefall was the only one who had seen him sneak off. She desperately wanted to know where he was going, but she had a kit to look after. The golden tabby queen slunk back into the nursery, where she was greeted by a nervous-looking Lilystream and Grasscloud.

"I'm sorry for the way I treated you earlier, Lilystream. We all make mistakes." Applefall gently lifted her kit, who had been tucked up against Grasscloud's swollen stomach, into her own nest and began gently licking her small head.

"You're more trouble than you're worth," she purred softly.

Chapter Two

[image] [image]

Shalestar had kept his word. The next day he traveled to the Highstones with Hawkfeather and Aspenglow. He returned the following day as Shalefire. Hawkfeather returned as Hawkstar.

Brookkit felt her mother warm with pride as Hawkstar entered the camp. She looked up at her, confused.

"Mama?" She asked.

"Yes Brookkit?" Applefall replied, not taking her eyes off the returning cats.

"When will Daddy come back?"

Applefall stiffened.

"You said he'd been sent on a warrior mission. Won't he ever come back?"

There was silence for a moment. Then the golden she-cat nuzzled her kit softly. "I don't know."

But I don't want him to, she thought.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a clan meeting!" Hawkstar's yowl rang out across the hollow.

"Come on," Applefall told her kit, "we'll watch from outside the nursery."

All the cats seemed very excited, and were shuffling around in their paws and whispering to each other.

"Didn't take Hawkstar very long to figure out who his deputy would be, did it?" One of the elders rasped.

"He probably had it figured out when *he* was deputy!" Another said.

Hawkstar, perched on top of the Highrock, signaled with his tail. The cats fell silent.

"Cats of ThunderClan," he began, "I'm honored to have become your leader. I shall do my best to serve and help you through both good and hard times."

The cats cheered.

"Shalefire." The black and white tom looked up at his former deputy. "I hope you enjoy your life in the elder's den. I also hope you will allow me to confide with you, just as if I were still deputy."

"Of course, Hawkstar," he rasped, "it would be my honor."

The cats' gazes softened a little upon hearing these words. This cat was more like the Shalefire they had known in the past.

"Then by ancient tradition, it is now time to choose a new deputy. I say these words before StarClan, that the spirits of our ancestors may hear and approve my choice."

Brookkit watched as almost every cat held their breath, waiting for their leader to speak again.

She saw Hawkstar's golden eyes shine and then, "Emberheart will be the new deputy."

Joyful meows of *congratulations* rang across the camp. Emberheart looked slightly embarrassed, but she dipped her head and said, "Although I am neither as experienced or wise as some of you, I promise to try my hardest in my new position, and to serve you the best I can."

More yowls erupted from the cats. The dark tabby she-cat had been popular choice among them. She was an excellent warrior, and could keep her head in bad situations.

Brookkit saw her mother's tail twitching in agitation. Did she not approve of Hawkstar's choice? Before she could ask, Applefall

grabbed her scruff and carried her back inside the nursery.

"It's time for you to go to sleep."

"But-"

"Hush."

Brookkit shut her mouth, but still she wondered what was bothering her mother.

"I'm going to be a better warrior than you!"

"No you're not, I am!"

Brookkit watched the two older kits fight, rolling her blue eyes. Two moons had passed since Emberheart had become deputy. New-leaf was now giving way to green-leaf, and several things were under way. Leafkit and Berrykit, the two fighting kits, would become apprentices soon. Brookkit herself would have to wait for two and half more moons. Grasscloud had also given birth to her kit, Amberkit. He was a dark red tom, with large, bright eyes that were slowly becoming orange. He had become Brookkit's friend in the past moon, which she was grateful for. Berrykit or Leafkit hadn't even let Brookkit hang around them.

"Stay away, kit! We don't want to play your games!"

Brookkit gave a sigh as she approached them. *Who said anything about playing,* she thought angrily. Still she approached them.

"I said stay away!" Berrykit hissed, causing Brookkit to shrink back a little.

"I never said I was going to bother you," the kit mewed.

"Well you are *now*, aren't you?"

What kind of hairball is stuck up your throat?

"Aren't you?"

Brookkit had had enough. She let out no screech as she launched herself at the much larger kit. Berrykit was taken more by surprise than anything. She quickly recovered, rolling to free the kit from her back. However, this didn't stop Brookkit. She ran back towards Berrykit, dropping to the ground at the last second and sliding under her, raking her tiny claws against the red tabby kit's stomach. Berrykit screeched and jumped back.

"You little piece of mouse dung!"

Before she could do anything else however, teeth sunk into her scruff and pulled her away from Brookkit.

"You've been taught an important lesson today, Berrykit, by one of your fellow kits. ThunderClan will not put up with your selfish antics and rudeness, especially not the warriors or myself. How would you feel if I delayed your apprenticeship by one moon?" Hawkstar towered over the kit, glowering at her.

"Very bad," she squeaked, eyes wide.

"Good. At least you can feel *guilt*. If you treat any cat that way again, you will be waiting for another moon." The golden eyes traveled over to Leafkit, who was watching the scene from in front of the nursery. "This applies to you too, Leafkit, or any other kit who treats others with great disrespect."

Hawkstar then walked over to the Highrock, where Emberheart was waiting to discuss something with him. Briefly Brookkit met his eyes, but she looked away hurriedly. Even though he had defended her, she was still quite intimidated by the cream-colored tom and his golden-green eyes. His long fur made him look like a lion sometimes, and she could easily picture him in one of the legends the elders had told her about LionClan, one of the ancient ancestors of the forest cats.

Brookkit shivered, then began to turn towards the nursery, only to run into something soft and golden. Slowly she looked up into the light-green eyes of her mother.

Uh-oh.

Applefall lifted her kit up and padded into the nursery. Brookkit swallowed uneasily, waiting for the lecture her mother was about to give her. She caught a glimpse of Berrykit outside of Aspenglow's den. No doubt she was having her scratches treated. Brookkit was plopped into her mother's nest. She sat stiff, quietly awaiting her fate.

"That was a reckless and dangerous thing to do," Applefall began, "you could have seriously been hurt. Berrykit is much bigger than you, and as you know she doesn't have much mercy."

Brookkit was surprised. Wasn't her mother mad she had hurt another kit? Applefall must have seen the question in her expression.

"On the other paw, I *do* think that kit needed a lesson. She was getting too bossy for her own good. And you fought very well for not having any training." Applefall's voice was filled with pride. "I'm sure you will become a fine warrior when you become older."

Embarrassment flooded through Brookkit. Grasscloud and Amberkit were also in the nursery, but the she-cat only purred with amusement and began licking her kit.

Amberkit looked like he wanted to protest, but kept his mouth shut. Brookkit couldn't help smirking a little at him before settling down in the nest.

Chapter Three

[image]

The dark cat kept low as the dogs passed, hoping they wouldn't scent him. Where were they? They were supposed to meet him here. Darkcloud let his fur lie flat as the dogs were dragged away by their twolegs. *Why did I ever think I could count on them?*

He should have known better than to trust the word of rogues. Letting out a small hiss, he began to crawl out of the brush. His odd, fluffy tail caught on a patch of briars, making Darkcloud hiss again. *Can't I have a break?* He twisted back around and took his tail in his mouth, gently pulling it out of the thorns.

An owl hooted somewhere as he stepped onto the empty twoleg path. His stomach growled, but he was too tired and irritated to hunt properly. Instead he curled up in a hollowed out stump off the side of the path and tried to sleep.

"Hey, sleepyhead, are we going to have a meeting or not?"

Darkcloud rose slowly, almost wishing that they *hadn't* come now. "Hello, Scarlet. How many of your friends did you manage to bring?"

"Nine," the dark red she-cat replied.

Darkcloud was impressed. She had brought more than he had thought she would, but still not enough. But that could be dealt with later. He climbed up onto the edge of the stump.

"Now would you like to introduce yourselves or do you want me to get straight to business?"

A ginger tom stepped forward. "Let's just get to why we are here."

Darkcloud smirked. "Fair enough. You, my friends, are here to

take revenge."

"Revenge for what?!" A silver she cat spat.

"Your lack of food, and of territory."

"We can't fight the twolegs! Are you mouse-brained?"

"Since when did I say I was talking about twolegs?" He hissed softly.

The silver she-cat tilted her head and became quiet.

"I'm talking about those clan cats in the forest! Think about it! Think of how many times they have chased you away from the border, telling you that the mouse you chased first was their prey now that it was in their land. Think of how you have starved in the winter, forced to eat disgusting twoleg food scraps while the clan cats still feast upon fresh prey!"

The rogues shuffled their paws, looking angry as they realized his words were true.

"This is what I have to say! I say if we can get enough cats together, we can chase those cats right out of the forest! Then you will have it *and* the land near twolegplace. Think of how much prey you will have to hunt! Think of the *kits* that *die* of starvation here!"

The cats were more riled up than ever. They hissed and spat and yowled as they thought of their kin who had died in twolegplace.

"So, here is the question; will you rise up against the clan cats? Will you come together as one for this task? Will you avenge your fallen kin?!"

The rogues yowled their answers.

"I'm not going to let any clan cat run my life!"

"Yes, let's do it!"

They continued for a while, until the silver she-cat asked, "If we

unite as one, doesn't that make us just like the clan cats?"

The rogues became silent. Darkcloud flicked his tail, smirking again. "Of course it doesn't. Because the clan cats have a code. They have rules. You are loners! Rogues! You're free! You don't *have* any rules, even as one!"

Yowls split the cold night air once more.

"You're lying to them, aren't you?" Scarlet asked softly as the rogues departed. "Even if they win the forest from the clan cats, they'll still kill each other over prey and territory. The reason the clan cats survive is because of their code. But of course, you'd know that."

Darkcloud turned to her, blue eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "I really don't care what happens to them afterwards, so as long as they tear ThunderClan apart, I'll be happy." He smirked. "You know me too well, Scarlet. I should probably get rid of you."

"Aw, but you won't. Like you said, I know you too well," she purred.

"Congratulations on attacking Furball over there," Rabbitpaw nodded in the direction of Berrykit, who had spent the entire day and night within five tail-lengths of her sister. "I'm not looking forward to having her as a denmate next moon."

Brookkit looked up at the apprentice. "I thought you two would get along great, considering how annoying Fallingpaw tells me you are."

The white tom purred. "She's only jealous."

"Of what?"

"The fact that I will become a warrior before her. And of my stubborn, but charming personality."

Brookkit smirked. The first part was true. Rabbitpaw *was* the oldest apprentice, and in about two moons he probably would receive his warrior name. The second part, however, was obviously his opinion.

"At least *you* only have to train with Berrypaw for a moon. I have to train with her for StarClan knows *how* long."

"Aw, don't be so depressed. We both know you can sort her out." He purred and licked his small friend's head.

"I wish I was older, so we could train together."

"Well, since I probably will be a warrior by the time you become an apprentice, I might be your mentor."

"You mouse-brain. Hawkstar won't pick you."

Rabbitpaw ignored her and started to pad away. "Oh, and remember Brookkit; you were born too early as it is."

The kit watched her friend greet his mentor, Mistfur, and then began to search the camp for her mother. She found her, to her own surprise, talking with Hawkstar.

"I realize Brookkit is still two and a half moons away from becoming an apprentice, but I think it's time you started at least going on hunting patrols again. Don't worry about border patrols until you're a full-time warrior again. Is this fine with you?"

Brookkit watched her mother closely. Applefall looked happy yet nervous at the same time. Her eyes were wide, but not in fear. "Yes, it's quite alright with me. I've been itching to get back out in the forest. I'm starting to feel like a kit myself, trapped in camp all the time..." She turned as Brookkit approached her.

"I'm not interrupting you, am I?" Brookkit mewed.

"No, not all," Hawkstar said. "I was just telling your mother that she's welcome to start joining the hunting patrols again. That is, if you can spare her," he meowed.

Applefall purred in amusement. "Surely you can, Brookkit?"

The kit nodded.

"Then it's settled then. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to help with a couple of our apprentices assessments."

Brookkit and Applefall watched their leader bound across the clearing and into the gorse tunnel.

"You really like him, don't you mama?" Brookkit asked quietly.

Applefall stiffened slightly, then took a breath. It took her a minute or so to answer. Her kit stared up at her, blue eyes wide. "He's a fine leader, Brookkit. You'll learn to appreciate him more once you become an apprentice."

That's not what I meant, Brookkit thought. She already, despite her age, had seen the change in the cats' life since Hawkstar had taken over. The tom had even defended her the other day when she had fought Berrykit. Of *course* she appreciated him. But she did not want to argue with her mother, so she merely dipped her head and trotted over to the elders den. Maybe Duskpelt or Shalefire would have a story to tell.

"Aw, there's the little rascal," Twigtail meowed from on top of the fallen log, "Come back for another one of Duskpelt's dramatic tales?"

Brookkit nodded, and then poked her head inside. "Duskpelt?"

The elderly gray tabby lifted her head at the sound of the kit's voice. "Brookkit? Is that you?"

"Yes, Duskpelt," she replied as she crawled towards the gray she-cat. Once she was settled beside her, she looked up at Duskpelt. "Why aren't you outside sunning yourself with Twigtail and Dustscar?"

"Why aren't you out exploring the forest?" Duskpelt teased.

"Because I'm a kit," Brookkit mumbled.

"That hasn't stopped you before. But yes, you're right. Kits belong in the nursery, old cats belong in the elders den."

"Not always!" Brookkit protested, "Since he retired, Shalefire has actually perked up! He's hardly ever in here."

"Even with his multiple lives, young one, I'm still much older than Shalefire."

Brookkit was about to protest once more when Duskpelt spoke again. "Have you come for a story?" Shutting her mouth, Brookkit nodded.

"Well then, how about the tale with the horses in it? Have you heard that one yet?"

"No," the kit mewed, eyes wide.

"You see, I'd been sent on a warrior mission by..." The she-cat began, lapsing into storytelling mode. Brookkit curled up against her and wished she would never stop talking.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock for a clan meeting!"

A moon had passed, and it was time for Leafkit and Berrykit to become apprentices.

"Oh no," Fallingpaw whispered to Rabbitpaw, "the apprentices den is going to be absolutely *crowded*!"

Brookkit took her place just outside the nursery, next to Applefall. Amberkit sat nearby, his orange eyes gazing up in awe at Hawkstar. Indeed the Thunderclan leader looked majestic as he sat upon the Highrock, glancing down at the gathering cats.

"ThunderClan! It has been six moons since Sageclaw's kits were born, and so by the warrior code the time has come for them to become apprentices. Leafkit, from this day forward you will be known as Leafpaw. Minkpelt, you will be Leafpaw's mentor. Be sure

to pass on your courage and strength."

The long-haired she cat padded forward and touched noses with the calico apprentice.

"Berrykit, you are now named Berrypaw, and your mentor will be Mapleclaw."

Mapleclaw dipped his head to Hawkstar, and proceeded to touch noses with Berrypaw. The red tabby she-cat flinched a little, but Brookkit could tell she was happy that Mapleclaw was her mentor. Vaguely the kit wondered who her mentor would be when she became an apprentice.

"Leafpaw! Berrypaw!" The cats yowled the new apprentices names. Hawkstar lept down from the Highrock, having a brief word with Emberheart before striding into his den.

Minkpelt and Mapleclaw beckoned for their apprentices to follow them out of camp. The two sisters exchanged excited looks before bounding off towards the gorse tunnel. Brookkit felt herself sigh as she watched them. *It's only a little while longer until I become an apprentice.*

But even that had its downside. Amberkit was three moons younger than her, which meant she would have to leave him behind in the nursery. And besides, she wasn't looking forward to sharing a den with Leafpaw and Berrypaw again.

"Brookkit!"

The kit turned as Amberkit bounced over to her, his orange-yellow eyes wide.

"What?"

"I was just thinking," the reddish tom gasped, "about becoming apprentices and all."

Brookkit waited for him to continue, her tail flicking around impatiently.

"Well, you're a lot older than me..."

"Only by three moons," she purred, trying to hide that she was worried for the very same reason.

"But that means three moons of being an apprentice while I'm still in the nursery!"

Brookkit didn't reply this time, and shuffled her paws a bit.

"So that means you can teach me all the stuff you're learning to me, so I'll already know lots before I even become an apprentice!"

She perked her ears up, realizing he was right. She hadn't thought about it that way before. "Maybe I can. But we've still got about a moon together in the nursery. Let's enjoy it while we can."

Chapter Four

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Brookkit's last moon before her apprenticeship passed very quickly. She and Amberkit spent most of their time causing mischief, talking, or listening to one of Duskpelt's stories. In truth, the silver tabby was still not ready when Hawkstar called the clan together for a meeting.

"Cats of ThunderClan, it seems that it was only a few sunrises ago that snow and ice covered the land, and that Applefall's kit was born. Despite however it seems, it is indeed time for Brookkit to become an apprentice."

Brookkit felt a chill run through her as she gazed into Hawkstar's gold-green eyes.

"From this day forward, you shall be known as Brookpaw. Ravenfoot, I believe you are ready for your first apprentice. Be sure to pass on your stealth and quick-thinking."

Briefly, Brookpaw looked at Rabbitflight. He smirked a little at her, which translated into *guess I'm not going to be your mentor, you silly furball*. The white and orange splotched tom had become a warrior about half a moon ago after successfully dealing with a RiverClan patrol that had come over to Sunningrocks.

Then the silver tabby turned to Ravenfoot. He was a younger warrior like Rabbitflight, and was a reddish color like Amberkit, but had black legs, inspiring his warrior name. His eyes were a calculating green. Brookpaw knew barely anything about him, accept that he was quiet and somehow managed to avoid being seen despite his unusual markings. *Why had Hawkstar chosen him to be her mentor?* Despite her mind being crowded by all these thoughts, Brookpaw managed to step forward and touch noses with the reddish tom. He seemed remarkably calm about receiving his first apprentice, but his gentleness calmed her a bit. At least he didn't seem harsh.

"Brookpaw!" The clan yowled her new name, then slowly began dispersing from the clearing. Applefall edged her way over to her daughter and gave her a lick between the ears. "Don't worry about Ravenfoot, young one. He's much more friendly once you get to know him."

Brookpaw's eyes widened. She had forgotten her mother had trained Ravenfoot. He had become a warrior shortly before Applefall had first expected kits. Once again the thought of her father crossed her mind, but she held herself back from saying anything. Any time she brought up the subject, her mother's mood seemed to darken and she was irritable for the rest of the day. By now Brookpaw had assumed he was either dead or had left for good.

Applefall flashed a proud glance in her direction, then padded off towards the elders den. No doubt she was going to gab to Duskpelt. Brookpaw felt the gaze of another cat upon her, and she turned to find Ravenfoot standing behind her.

"Come, I need to show you the territory," he stated quietly, then added, even more softly, "though I daresay you already know parts of it well from your explorations as a kit."

Brookpaw felt her pelt heat up in embarrassment, but her mentor failed to mention if he was kidding or not. So she replied, "I think I know the area around the stream pretty well."

Though she could not see his face, Brookpaw could tell Ravenfoot was smirking as he lead her into the gorse tunnel that was both the entrance and exit of the camp.

The first place they had visited was the sandy hollow. It was not far from the camp, and Brookpaw already knew it was where the apprentices practiced battle moves and techniques. Ravenfoot then lead her along the stream to Sunningrocks, the very place Rabbitflight had chased the RiverClan patrol away from.

"That fishy smell would be the scent of RiverClan. You'll need to remember it for future times."

Brookpaw took in the scent, vaguely wondering what fish tasted like as she did so. "You know, it could be a lot worse."

"Wait to we get to the ShadowClan border. It smells like marsh and frogs."

The two cats then traveled to Tallpines, which bordered Twolegplace.

"It's best to stay away from there," Ravenfoot said, referring to Twolegplace, "when you can, at least. We have to mark the border along here, yes, but otherwise don't go near the twolegs. They aren't all bad, but it's better to keep away from them."

"And what about the kittypets?" Brookpaw asked.

Ravenfoot was silent for a moment. "Some are pathetic and aren't much harm at all. Some are just as hardy as the clan cats but prefer to stay with their twolegs. And some are vicious and terrible, and should be avoided at all costs."

"The rogues are like that too, aren't they? Some are okay, but others are horrible?"

Ravenfoot nodded. Together they gazed through the pines at the wooden fences that marked the border of Twolegplace. Then they continued on, not saying a word to each other as they did so.

"And then where'd you go?" Amberkit asked, wide-eyed.

"We went to Snakerocks. And then to the Great Sycamore. And then to the thunderpath. And then to Fourtrees. And then back to camp."

"You're not being very descriptive," the kit complained.

"I don't want to spoil it all for you, silly. You'll see it for yourself soon enough."

Amberkit's orange eyes blazed. "You call three moons *soon*?"

"Brookpaw!" Rabbitflight was calling her.

The she-cat looked to her friend. "I'm sorry, I have to go. I promise I'll keep you updated, okay?"

Amberkit nodded, and slowly began walking back towards the nursery. Brookpaw felt a pang in her heart as she watched him go. *It doesn't feel fair to leave him behind.*

"Brookpaw, are you *deaf*?" Rabbitflight hissed. He had come over to her. "Duskpelt wants to see you."

Brookpaw nodded, and bounded over to the elders log where she saw the old gray she-cat waiting. Duskpelt let out a small mrow of amusement as she approached. "You know Brookpaw, if you want to hear a story these days, you'll have to pick the fleas off Dustscar and I as you listen."

Well, the apprentices are supposed to look after the elders. She nodded to Duskpelt and meowed, "Why don't you start, then?

Picking fleas off the elders wasn't as bad as it had originally sounded, Brookpaw decided. Her reward was to listen to Duskpelt ramble on about how she had chased a kittypet off the territory and into Twolegplace in her youth.

"There were twolegs and dogs everywhere, but somehow I manged to..."

It went on for a while, ending just as Brookpaw finished picking the fleas off Dustscar. The tom grumbled gratefully and then fell into as deep sleep.

"You'd better get some sleep yourself, young one," Duskpelt rasped, "it's likely that tomorrow Ravenfoot will take you on the dawn patrol."

Brookpaw nodded, and then exited the hollow log. She gave a small greeting to Twigtail and Shalefire, who were both sitting on top of the den, basking in the last light of the day. Fallingpaw was sitting outside the apprentice's den, looking disgusted.

"What's wrong?" Brookpaw asked her.

Fallingpaw sighed. "I don't think I'm going to become a warrior."

"Why not? Afraid you're going to break the warrior code and murder one of those two?" Brookpaw smirked, gesturing with her tail at Leafpaw and Berrypaw, who were quarreling about something inside the den.

"That's *exactly* what I'm afraid of," the light tabby hissed, "they've gotten worse, especially Berrypaw, since Rabbitflight became a warrior. Leafpaw isn't so bad, I suppose, but Berrypaw is the most annoying furball I've ever met."

Brookpaw sat down next Fallingpaw, scanning the camp for Ravenfoot as she did so. "Who knows what'll happen? I took Berrypaw out when we were kits, remember?"

Fallingpaw let out a *mrrow* of amusement. "Who doesn't?"

Moments later Brookpaw finally spotted her mentor slinking towards the warriors den. "Will you excuse me for a minute?" She meowed to the other apprentice and bounded off towards Ravenfoot.

Green eyes met blue as she skidded to a non-graceful stop in front of the black-legged tom.

"In a hurry?" He asked dryly.

"No," Brookpaw huffed, "I just wanted to ask...since all the elders are saying I'm going to do it..."

"If we're going on the dawn patrol?" Ravenfoot finished her question, smirking. "No. We will of course in the future, but not tomorrow. Go get some sleep. We'll still be going out early." He twitched his whiskers, then began to pad off towards the warrior den.

Brookpaw watched him go, feeling relieved. She'd seen most of the territory already today. *I'd much rather learn how to hunt or fight. Especially since I'm sharing a den with Berrypaw. Some fighting moves*

might come in handy. Yawning, she was about to head back to the apprentices den when she heard someone hissing her name.

"Brookpaw!" It was Rabbitflight again.

Can't I get a break, she thought grumpily, and turned to face the young tom. "I'd like to get some sleep, so make it quick, will you?"

Rabbitflight stepped back in mock hurt. "You're in a good mood."

"I walked all over the territory today, you stupid furball. I'm sure you weren't a ray of sunshine either when you did it the first time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to sleep." She padded off angrily to her den, wondering not for the first time how Fallingpaw had put up with Rabbitflight for so long. Sometimes he was the funniest cat in the camp, and sometimes he just drove her mad.

Though she did not see him, or honestly care at the moment, the white and ginger splotched tom really did look hurt this time. "I was just going to ask how your first day went," he grumbled, then sulked off towards the warriors den.

That night, Brookpaw dreamt a black cat was calling her name, again and again. His voice was familiar, yet she had never heard it before. There also didn't seem to be much emotion in it. The cat never came closer to her, nor moved farther away. Brookpaw stayed where she was. The black tom both fascinated and scared her, and she woke feeling as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Move over!" Berrypaw grumbled, pushing Brookpaw away from her. The silver tabby realized she'd been fussing in her sleep, and had rolled out of her nest. "Sorry, she muttered, and proceeded to exit the den.

It was misty this morning, and everything felt wet under her paws, though there had been no rain overnight. The sun hadn't risen yet, but it already looked cloudy. Brookpaw stretched, flexing her claws, then began to look for Ravenfoot. Instead she found Emberheart and Hawkstar organizing the dawn patrol. Snowblaze and Mistfur were walking sleepily out of the warriors den, and Sageclaw was giving her paw a good lick before she set off on the patrol with the

others. *Isn't she going to take Fallingpaw with her?* Brookpaw wondered, but then she realized that the warrior probably expected her apprentice to know the drill by now.

A few moments later, Fallingpaw emerged from the apprentices den, proving her point. The light tabby bounded over to Sageclaw, who nodded approvingly at her. "We'll be joining the dawn patrol this morning, and when we return we'll go straight to the sandy hollow for some battle training," Brookpaw heard Sageclaw tell her apprentice softly.

"Who will we be training with?" Fallingpaw asked, green eyes shining.

For a moment Brookpaw thought she felt Sageclaw's amber eyes upon her, but in an instant they were gone, resting again upon Fallingpaw. "We'll have to wait and see. Come on, the patrol is leaving." The two cats followed Emberheart, Snowblaze, and Mistfur out of the gorse tunnel.

Brookpaw shivered suddenly as Ravenfoot appeared out of nowhere, meowing quietly, "I just wanted to wait for the dawn patrol to leave. It's easier to let them get organized and go than trying to leave exactly when they are."

She nodded, wanting desperately to ask what they were doing this morning. The question must have shown in her eyes, because Ravenfoot twitched his whiskers and simply said, "You'll see."

He lead her out if the gorse tunnel, barely making a sound. *How does he just slink around everywhere?* Brookpaw pondered, trying to copy his movements. But it was harder than her mentor made it look, and she nearly tripped when she was coming out of the opposite end of the tunnel.

Ravenfoot did not speak, but he signaled with his tail for her to follow him before slipping into the brush. Brookpaw cursed under her breath before diving in after him, trying even harder than before to be careful where she put her paws. The result was a lot of snapping twigs and two more curses. Ravenfoot still said nothing. Instead he would pause every now and then, allowing her to catch

up before continuing on. *Isn't he going to say anything? Even to scold me?* She thought bitterly. The silver tabby began to get distracted, and was more focused on her thoughts rather than her paws. Surprisingly, she was making less noise than before, and before Brookpaw knew it she too was slinking through the undergrowth almost noiselessly. Yet she was still distracted, and she nearly ran into her mentor, who had finally stopped on a deer trail.

"You do have eyes, don't you?" He asked, amused.

"Sorry, I just kind of-"

"You learn quickly though," the tom continued, "you were making less and less noise with each paw step you took."

"I was?" Brookpaw asked.

Ravenfoot nodded. "Sometimes the best way to learn something is to not focus on it so hard. Sometimes when you try too hard, you mess up more than you would trying it a little less."

"Did Applefall teach you that?"

"Yes, but in a very different way. Turns out, I'm naturally good at sneaking," Ravenfoot meowed softly, his dark green eyes lit with amusement. "Come on, I'm going to teach you how to stalk prey today."

They walked up the deer trail for a little while until they reached a small clearing among the trees.

"You'll practice first in the open," Ravenfoot murmured, "then once you start to get the hang of it we'll head into the brush again."

"Will I get to actually hunt today?" She asked hopefully.

"Perhaps."

Even though it was not a definite answer, a spark of hope rose through Brookpaw, and she gazed back up at her mentor, eyes blazing. "Okay, what do I do?"

"First," Ravenfoot began, "you have to drop down close to the ground but still remain on your feet. You still want to be able to spring."

Stiffly, she lowered herself and shuffled her paws a little in the soft dirt. "Like this?"

Instead of answering, Ravenfoot pushed her side with his forepaw, causing Brookpaw to topple over before she could react. She let a small hiss and pulled herself up, shaking the dirt out of her fur.

"Try loosening up a bit," he commented dryly.

Once again Brookpaw tried lowering herself, but her legs still felt stiff and locked in place. She looked over at Ravenfoot, but his expression showed neither disapproval or praise. "Do you remember what I said about trying too hard?" He prompted.

Taking a deep breath, the silver tabby lowered herself for the third time, feeling slightly less stiff, but she still felt that a cat would be able to push her over too easily.

"Here, let's try this another way. Follow me again," Ravenfoot meowed. He vanished into the undergrowth once more.

Have I done something wrong? Brookpaw thought hurriedly before creeping after him. They did not go far. A swish of the tail told her to be quiet, and then Brookpaw picked up the scent of bird. Looking ahead, she saw a chickadee bobbing around on the forest floor ahead of them, chattering to no one, it seemed.

Instinctively she dropped into a crouch, staring wide-eyed at the bird. She was so focused on it that Brookpaw did not realize Ravenfoot was also down in a perfect hunter's crouch. The black-legged tom pounced and in an instant delivered the killing bite. Brookpaw was impressed. He had been so quick, she had barely seen him leap!

"Nice catch!" She told him, tail flicking back and forth. "I wish I could say I'd done the same."

Her mentor leaned down to sniff the dead chickadee then looked up

at Brookpaw. "Thank you. But you did much better that time. Sometimes doing things by instinct can teach you faster than just the same old instructions." He paused, looking up at the tree tops.

The sun had risen, but the clouds covered it, so it only seemed that the sky was a lighter shade of gray. *It seems like it might rain.*

"It smells like rain is on the way," Ravenfoot meowed, confirming her thoughts. Let's practice your crouch a few more times and head back. We'll keep working on this tomorrow."

Now that her instincts had kicked in, Brookpaw found dropping into her hunter's crouch easier and easier each time she did it. They even practiced in the undergrowth a few times. Ravenfoot nodded approvingly, and then lightly tapped her shoulder with his tail. "You've done well, Brookpaw. Let's head back to camp. You can deliver this chickadee to the elders. As long as you don't take credit for it," he added, smirking. "We'll head out later with Sageclaw and Fallingpaw for a little bit of battle training."

Brookpaw stiffened a little. She got along well with Fallingpaw, but the older apprentice was already much more experienced than her. The idea that she might be fighting her seemed daunting to Brookpaw, but she hid her hesitation, looking up at Ravenfoot and meowing, "That sounds fun!"

"Don't neglect your services to the elders, though," he reminded her, "Just because I hunted a little for them this day does not mean you'll never have to."

"Of course not!" She replied, getting defensive, "I love helping them out."

Her mentor did not reply. Brookpaw felt a drop of rain splatter on her nose. Twitching, she began to follow Ravenfoot back to the camp.

Chapter Five

[image]

"Did you catch that?" Duskpelt rasped, eyeing the chickadee hungerly.

"No," Brookpaw admitted, "Ravenfoot did. But I promise when I get good at hunting I'll bring you the biggest bird I can catch!"

Duskpelt gave a *mrrow* of amusement. "You'd better." The old she-cat began picking the bird apart.

Brookpaw turned to the other elders. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Twigtail shook her head. "Berrypaw brought me a squirrel to eat earlier. I'm fine. Dustscar just needs a nap, I think."

The tom grumbled at the bob-tailed she cat, but Brookpaw could tell it was good-natured. She turned to Shalefire, dipping her head in respect.

"No, but thank you, Brookpaw. To tell you the truth, I've been feeling a lot better since I've joined the elders. I can still pick fleas off myself," he said, purring.

Brookpaw left the den, hoping Amberkit was awake. She desperately wanted to make up for her lame description of the territory yesterday. Poking her head in the nursery, she called quietly, "Grasscloud?"

The cream tabby lifted her head, yawning. "Looking for Amberkit?"

"Yeah, is he in there?"

A small head popped up from behind Grasscloud, golden eyes wide.

"Brookpaw? Did you go to train? How was it? Did-"

His mother cut him off. "If you two are going to chatter on about something, would you mind doing it somewhere else?"

Amberkit's ears flattened, ashamed. "Sorry, Mama." He crawled around her then lept out of the entrance towards Brookpaw.

"So what did you learn?" the kit asked once they were out in the open.

"The beginning stages of hunting."

Amberkit's eyes widened.

"Don't get too excited, I was just learning to crouch down properly so that I can leap really far," she purred.

Instead of looking disappointed, as she had expected him to be, Amberkit looked keenly up at her and meowed, "Will you teach me?"

Amberkit was a natural. Unlike Brookpaw, it had only taken him a few tries to drop down into a perfect hunter's crouch. The kit hadn't even complained about the rain that was now beating down on them. *He'll be a great hunter someday*, Brookpaw thought, pride seeping through her as she watched her friend launch himself at his unsuspecting father.

"What in the name of Starclan-" Firelight spat, but upon realizing it was only his son, he began to purr loudly. "You're already a little warrior, aren't you?"

Amberkit puffed out his chest, looking very pleased with himself.

Suddenly a cat pummeled out of the horse tunnel, raindrops flicking off their soaked pelt as they ran. "RiverClan is back over the border again!" Jaysong screeched, breaking the calm that had settled over the camp. She was followed closely by Stormclaw.

Hawkstar bounded over to the two cats. "What are they doing?"

"Hunting around Sunningrocks again! I thought the last border fight would be enough to keep them away, but-"

"Jaysong," Hawkstar meowed, interrupting her, "You will take Rabbitflight, Snowblaze, Minkpelt, and Leafpaw on another patrol to scare them off. I'll come slightly after you with Applefall and Emberheart. Stormclaw, you are in charge of camp until we return. Is that all clear?"

Jaysong and the others dipped their heads.

"Good. Take your patrol now. We'll meet up with you shortly."

Brookpaw and Amberkit watched as the cats started to head out of the camp. Pricking her ears forward, she heard Berrypaw whisper, "May StarClan be with you," to Leafpaw, who was also with first patrol.

"Come on, Leafpaw, or we'll fall behind," Minkpelt told her apprentice gently. The calico nodded, bid farewell to Berrypaw, and bounded into the gorse tunnel after Minkpelt.

"Don't you want to go say goodbye to Applefall?" Amberkit asked, his eyes filled with an emotion she couldn't place.

He was right of course. The thought hadn't truly hit her until now. *My mother is going into battle. My mother is going into battle.*

"I mean, I know it only a border fight, and those aren't usually bad-"

Brookpaw didn't listen to the rest. She gently licked her small friend's head and headed straight for Applefall, who was sitting patiently with Emberheart. Brookpaw sensed that same irritation though, the one that always occurred when her mother was near the clan deputy. She still hadn't figured out why Applefall seemed to dislike Emberheart, but now was not the time to think about it.

"Uh, Applefall?" Her voice came out much shakier than she had planned.

The golden brown tabby she-cat turned, her eyes softening as she spotted her daughter. "Brookpaw. I was going to come over, you know."

"I know you would have, but..." Brookpaw trailed off, and instead asked what she had meant to in the first place. "Will you be alright?"

Applefall let out a purr. "It's only a border fight, dear. I'll be just fine."

Brookpaw wished she could believe that. She watched as Hawkstar called her mother and Emberheart over, talking to them briefly before leading the patrol out of camp. To her surprise, Stormclaw walked over to her, his yellow eyes filled with compassion. "I know how you feel, young one, but you must believe me when I say this; your mother is an excellent warrior, and there's a very good chance she'll get out of this battle unhurt."

Brookpaw looked up at the older tom. "Thanks, Stormclaw."

He nodded, and then spoke to Berrypaw, who was still gazing at the gorse tunnel, lost in thought. "Minkpelt will look after your sister, Berrypaw. But don't forget, Leafpaw is becoming a fine fighter herself, as are you."

It was one of the only times Brookpaw had seen Berrypaw look truly grateful. She didn't reply to Stormclaw, but she dipped her head in respect before she turned away, stalking off towards the apprentices den.

As she looked around the clearing, Brookpaw realized she was one of the only cats still out in the downpour. Amberkit had gone back into the nursery, and the only other cat still out was Stormclaw. The big, gray tabby tom sat near the Highrock, ears twitching. Then the rain picked up even more, and drops fell on her muzzle and pelt, making her shiver, so Brookpaw finally gave in and crawled into the apprentices den. Berrypaw and Fallingpaw were inside. Berrypaw had returned to her usual crabby self, and Fallingpaw was curled up in her nest, asleep. Settling down into her own nest, Brookpaw felt helpless as she waited for her clanmates to

return.

Somehow, she managed to fall into a troubled sleep. Once again the black tom prowled her dreams. But he was not alone. A long-haired red she-cat stood next to him, and together they stood *mrrowed* at Brookpaw, taunting her from a distance. Once again she remained in place, still curious about who these cats were, but not curious enough to get a closer look.

Then the two cats disappeared, leaving Brookpaw alone. For a while she remained there, dreaming of darkness, until Fallingpaw prodded her shoulder.

"Get up! They're back!"

Brookpaw sprang up and out of the den, noticing that the rain had slowed, and scanned the clearing for Applefall. Instead her eyes fell upon two other cats; Hawkstar and Leafpaw. Both were covered in blood, especially around their faces.

"Leafpaw!" Shrieked Berrypaw, and she pushed her way through the crowd of cats. "Leafpaw, what happened!?"

"Get back! All of you!" Aspenglow hissed, her light blue eyes blazing. She padded up to the injured cats, inspecting them briefly before saying more gently, "Bring them inside my den."

Minkpelt let Leafpaw lean against her as they slowly entered the medicine den, followed closely by Snowblaze, who was helping Hawkstar.

As the two cats disappeared inside the den, Brookpaw realized why there was so much blood. Leafpaw's whole right ear had been clawed off, and a long gash on Hawkstar's face ran straight through his left eye. *Only a border fight?* She thought darkly, before looking for her mother once more. Brookpaw found her pacing near the warriors den. As Stormclaw had predicted, she was barely scratched.

"Applefall?" Brookpaw meowed.

Her mother did not reply. She continued pacing, looking very anxious. The silver tabby could hardly blame her. She too was worried about Hawkstar and Leafpaw. Who wasn't? Even Sageclaw, Leafpaw's usually cold mother, had looked stricken upon seeing her daughter covered in her own blood.

"What happened, mother?"

This time Applefall replied, but she continued to pace, back and forth and back and forth. "This has gone way beyond a border fight. Apprentices shouldn't *lose* their ears in border fights. Leaders should not lose an eye in *border fights!* I know Crowstar is an annoying furball, but I didn't know he was completely *senseless*!"

The last time Brookpaw had seen her mother so angry was when she was barely a moon old, the day she'd gotten out of camp for the first time and found the stream. And she barely remembered that.

"Who did it?"

"I don't know! I was actually fighting, not just standing there and watching from the *sidelines*!" Applefall spat, before she dropped to her paws and let out a small shriek of grief. Slowly Brookpaw approached her curled herself around her mother the best she could, not speaking a word. As she did so she glanced around the camp, watching the other cats' reactions. Berrypaw and Sageclaw were huddled together as well. Emberheart sat alone, looking grim as she waited near the medicine den. The elders poked their head out of their hollow log, looking worried. Rabbitflight and his sister, Lilystream, sat together, not saying a word. Some of the other cats kept busy doing regular things like cleaning out the old bedding from the dens. Brookpaw wanted desperately to help them, but Applefall was still shaken up, and she wouldn't leave her until she was at least a little more at ease.

The rain had slowed down, and now was more of a mist. For the first time since the cats had come returned, Aspenglow stepped outside the medicine den. She padded over to Emberheart and whispered something to dark tabby she-cat. The clan deputy

nodded and followed Aspenglow back inside the den. All the cats seemed to hold their breath until Emberheart stepped out again. Slowly, she headed in the direction of Highrock. Leaping up to the top, she gazed down at the clan, her orange eyes looking tired, yet hopeful at the same time.

"Hawkstar has asked me to lead the clan until he has healed enough to take over again," she began, "I promise I'll do my best in his place. He has also asked me to appoint a temporary deputy."

A few comments were exchanged between the cats, but Emberheart flicked her tail and the cats fell silent again.

"Stormclaw, will you accept the honor of becoming the deputy's deputy?" There was a hint of humor in her voice, and many cats *mrrowed* at the words, though they gazed at Stormclaw fondly. The offer was genuine.

"Only if ThunderClan thinks it's best," Stormclaw replied, whiskers twitching.

At once several cats spoke up.

"Of course you are!" Jaysong cried, "You're one of the bravest warriors we have!"

"Yeah, and you're also one of the wisest!" said Mapleclaw.

The big gray tabby seemed to shrink a little as his clan showered him with compliments, but he was purring. Once the yowling stopped, he faced Emberheart again. "I will accept this honor, Emberheart, and I promise to not be offended when Hawkstar is well and you retake your own position as deputy."

The cats cheered again, and for a moment Brookpaw felt like things were normal again. Then her mother twitched next to her, and she realized there were far from normal.

It's only my second day as an apprentice. What next, StarClan?

Chapter Six

[image]

Brookpaw stifled a hiss as Berrypaw managed to strike her again. The red tabby she-cat's eyes were gleaming, and it seemed that she was enjoying battering her around.

"Take it easy, Berrypaw, we're only training," Mapleclaw told his apprentice sternly.

Berrypaw didn't seem to hear him, and if she had, she ignored him completely. She leapt forward at Brookpaw again, and the silver tabby only just managed to dash out of the way before she was struck again.

"Try not to stiffen up," Ravenfoot suggested, "Be light on your feet."

Berrypaw struck again, and this time Brookpaw purposely dodged the blow at the last second. In that moment she twisted around and leapt onto her opponent's back. The red tabby hissed and lost her balance. She had not been expecting this. Rolling, she tried to dislodge Brookpaw from her back, but the silver tabby kept a hold. Berrypaw tried rolling again, but once more she failed to shake Brookpaw off. Eventually she collapsed, exhausted from carrying twice the amount of weight around.

Brookpaw let go, and Berrypaw shot her an evil glare as she repositioned herself at the opposite end of the hollw.

"Good job, both of you!" Mapleclaw meowed.

"Don't lie to me!" Berrypaw snapped, "I lost!"

Mapleclaw's tail swished. "You still learned something. Rolling was exactly the right approach to dislodging a cat from your back, especially when they are larger than you. Brookpaw, however,

happens to be smaller than you, so she was able to hold on easier."

Berrypaw still looked disgusted, but she said no more.

"Let's return to camp," Ravenfoot meowed softly, "We've done enough for the day."

Instead of waiting for the others, Berrypaw ran out ahead of them in the direction of the camp. Brookpaw said nothing as she watched Mapleclaw run after her. *She probably wants to check on Leafpaw,* she thought. *Not to mention escape her source of irritation, which would be me.*

Ravenfoot offered no view on the situation. Today he seemed particularly quiet, and Brookpaw hadn't been able to figure out why. She breathed in, scenting a mouse in the nearby undergrowth.

"I smell a mouse," she mewed softly.

Ravenfoot paused for a moment, then said, "Then try to catch it. I'll be back at camp."

She watched him pad silently away, once again wondering what was bothering him. *Focus on the mouse*, she told herself sternly.

Ravenfoot had taken her hunting for the first time about a quarter moon ago. Her crouching had improved a lot, and leaping from the position wasn't too hard for her. Of course, this method would work only for certain kinds of prey in certain situations, but this mouse *was* one of those situations. Again she breathed in the scent, and listened for scrabbling noises amongst the dead leaves.

A chilly breeze had started to blow, and dark clouds had settled in the sky, looking down upon the forest menacingly. *Surely not rain again?* Brookpaw hoped not. She was tired of this dreary, leaf-fall weather.

At first she heard nothing but the wind, but after a few moments a barely-possible-to-detect sound came from up ahead. Slowly Brookpaw stalked forward, letting her instincts and Ravenfoot's training guide her. *I'm so close*, she though, *but I still can't see this stupid mouse.* Desperately she tried to pinpoint it's location by

sound. *Still ahead of me, slightly to the right...*

At last Brookpaw spotted the mouse. It was burrowing under the fallen leaves, trying to dig out a den. She froze. After making sure her positioning was correct, Brookpaw sprang off her haunches, directly on top of the mouse. Quickly she gave it the killing bite, before it had a chance to escape.

StarClan, thank you for this prey, she thought, thinking of the moons ahead, in the chilly days of leaf-bare, when there wouldn't be so much prey to catch. Brookpaw gently picked up the mouse with her teeth, and began heading back again to camp. She found Ravenfoot's scent from earlier and followed it absent-mindedly, wishing he had seen her successfully hunt on her own for the first time. *But then again, I wouldn't exactly have been on my own if he had been there to watch me.*

The camp was surprisingly active when Brookpaw returned. Firelight and Grasscloud were sharing tongues near the warriors den. Duskpelt was telling a story to Amberkit, who looked absolutely fascinated by it. Berrypaw sat outside of the medicine den with Leafpaw. Brookpaw couldn't help noticing that the calico she-cat looked tired, but happy to be outside once more. Her wound had been healing well, unlike Hawkstar's. There was nothing more Aspenglow could do for his left eye. It would be permanently blinded, leaving him with a serious disadvantage for hunting or fighting, let alone daily life. Most of the cats believed he would cope, and Brookpaw was one of them. But she knew it would take him a while, and with leaf-bare setting in soon, it might take him even longer.

Hawkstar too was sitting outside of the medicine den, discussing something with Emberheart. Despite the circumstances, it didn't appear to be too serious, as the deputy gave a *mrrow* of amusement before padding away towards Stormclaw. After that, Brookpaw was surprised to see Applefall approach the clan leader. Desperately wanting to hear what she would say, Brookpaw tried to casually set the mouse down in the fresh-kill pile, but Ravenfoot managed to catch her first.

"So you *did* manage to catch it," he meowed softly, but there was

no pride in his voice. "Excellent. Instead of trying to snoop on your mother, why don't you deliver that to the elder, then get something for yourself to eat?"

Embarrassed, Brookpaw nodded and heading over towards the Dustscar, who was sitting outside the elders' log. "Hungry?" She asked him, purring.

The old tom blinked a few times before he sat up, stretching as he did so. "I sure am. What took you so long?"

"Sorry," she mewed as she dropped the mouse at his feet, "I was a bit slow when returning to camp."

Dustscar mumbled something she couldn't understand and began gnawing on the mouse. *Ungrateful, much*? Nevertheless she told the grumpy tom good-bye and returned to the fresh kill pile. Picking out a shrew to eat, Brookpaw settled down near the apprentices den with Fallingpaw, who was already feasting on a finch.

"How did training go today?" The light tabby asked, her green eyes sparkling with amusement.

Brookpaw sighed. "I thought it was going well until Berrypaw got irritated with me and ran off after it was over..." Her gaze wandered over to the said cat, who was still talking with her sister outside of Aspenglow's den. "I mean, I completely understand why she would want to check on her sister, but she was like this even before the border fight."

"I know," Fallingpaw agreed, "But we'll just have to ignore her for now. The only cat that can get that hairball out of her throat is herself."

The two apprentices ate their meals in silence, watching as a hunting patrol that included Applefall, Minkpelt, and Snowblaze left the camp. Brookpaw saw Minkpelt cast a glance at Leafpaw, her apprentice, before disappearing into the gorse tunnel.

"When do you think Leafpaw will start training again?" Fallingpaw murmured.

"Probably soon. She seems pretty good right now. Although it looks bad, I don't think having a clawed-off ear will disable her much."

Fallingpaw sighed. "True. But it must be annoying."

The she-cats' attention was averted when Rabbitflight bounded over to them, grinning madly.

"Have you gotten rabies!?" Fallingpaw meowed, snorting with laughter.

Rabbitflight cuffed her ear playfully. "No, you mouse-brain, Emberheart said I can lead a border patrol. You two want to come?"

Fallingpaw shook her head. "Sorry, I have a hunting lesson with Sageclaw this afternoon. And besides, I wouldn't want to patrol with you in a thousand moons."

Rabbitflight looked at her in mock hurt, then turned to Brookpaw. "How about you?"

"Can apprentices even go without their mentors?" She asked.

"Sometimes. We could ask."

Brookpaw hesitated. *Do I really want to spend the afternoon patrolling with my annoying friend?*

"Um...sure. Let's go ask Ravenfoot."

They found the black-legged tom near the nursery, to Brookpaw's surprise, chatting with Lilystream. He seemed to have dropped his gloomy attitude from earlier, and seemed much more lively than his usual calm demeanor. She gave Rabbitflight a look. Lilystream was his older sister, after all.

"Ravenfoot's a good cat. If my sister wants to hook up with him, that's fine by me," he meowed quietly.

As usual, Ravenfoot was the first to spot them. He turned to them, his green eyes narrowing.

"Can I borrow your apprentice for the afternoon?" Rabbitflight asked.

"For what?"

"A border patrol. We'll probably be back in late afternoon."

It was funny and kind of weird to see Rabbitflight acting like a grown-up, responsible warrior. She could hardly help stifling a laugh.

"And why should I trust you with my apprentice?" Ravenfoot asked, grinning. Lilystream gave him a shove.

"That's my brother," she purred, "maybe you should treat him with a little more respect."

Ravenfoot laid his tail on her flank. "I'm only teasing. Yes, Rabbitflight, you can borrow her for the afternoon, as long as you look after her."

Both Brookpaw and Rabbitflight grinned.

"I will. Thank you, Ravenfoot."

Brookpaw gave an appreciative nod to her mentor and followed Rabbitflight as he made for the gorse tunnel.

"Aren't you taking anyone else?" She asked, hoping to StarClan that she wouldn't have to be alone with Rabbitflight.

Instantly the white tom veered off to the left and nearly crashed into Jaysong, who was grooming herself. She gave a startled hiss as Rabbitflight came to a clumsy halt in front of her.

"Would you like to join us on a border patrol?" He asked, his voice deep and serious.

Jaysong laughed at him. "You sound like Stormclaw," she hissed under her breath. "Yeah, I'll come. Where are we going?"

"The ShadowClan border. I figured it wouldn't hurt since we've

been patrolling along the river so much."

The three cats slipped out of the gorse tunnel into the forest, heading over to Owltree first, then heading up towards the Thunderpath. Brookpaw had seen it only a few times after her first tour of the territory with Ravenfoot, and she scrunched up her nose at it's oily, polluted smell. She and the others renewed the scent markers, then continued down the side of the Thunderpath, keeping just inside the trees, which was still too close to the awful path in Brookpaw's opinion. The sharp scent of ShadowClan momentarily distracted her from her thoughts, and she breathed it in. At once she stopped in her tracks.

"Is it me, or has ShadowClan crossed the border?" She meowed to the others.

Jaysong and Rabbitflight both stopped to scent, and Jaysong nodded. "You're right, their scent does seem too strong for this side of the Thunderpath."

"Let's see if it goes anywhere," Rabbitflight meowed.

They found the place where the scent trailed off from the border only a little farther ahead, and it wasn't long until they found the actual ShadowClan cats themselves. Among them was a golden she-cat with black spots, a small gray tom with a tabby and white apprentice at his side, and a red tom that would have been handsome if not for the hideous scar that ran across his face. The she-cat seemed extremely worried, and she didn't try to hide it as the ThunderClan cats came into view, stopping the intruders in their tracks.

"What are you doing here?" Rabbitflight spat, glaring mostly at the red tom.

"I'd like to see you ask *her* that in that tone," the tom replied, gesturing at the worried-looking, spotted golden queen.

Rabbitflight glared at him, but said nothing.

"What's wrong, Suncloud?" Jaysong asked in a much gentler tone

than her companion.

The red tom smirked. "There's your manners."

"I've lost my kits!" Suncloud wailed. "We found their scent on the Thunderpath, but no bodies, so we figured they must have come...over here." She gave the ThunderClan cats a desperate look. "I promise we're not spying, or anything like that."

"Surely you wouldn't force us back over the border for this," the red tom meowed.

Jaysong twitched her whiskers. "Of course not, Redface."

Redface!? Isn't he the ShadowClan deputy?

"What are their names and what do they look like?" Brookpaw asked Suncloud.

Redface glanced at her, and Brookpaw felt like she was being judged under his gaze. Suncloud and the others simply seemed relieved.

"There's two; Jadekit and Gullkit. Jadekit is a very light gray tabby with green eyes, and Gullkit is gray and white with yellow eyes," Suncloud meowed. "But we lost their scent once we crossed the border."

"Why didn't one of you just come to tell us what had happened instead of sneaking over?" Rabbitflight meowed, a trace of venom still in his voice. He was glaring at Redface again.

"Rabbitflight, why don't you just stay here and argue with Redface?" Jaysong asked irritably. "Brookpaw and I will help Suncloud, Wildwind, and...Eaglepaw, right?"

The brown and white apprentice nodded.

"Okay, good. I'll check near Snakerocks. Brookpaw, you can look over by the stream and Owltree. Wildwind, go with Rabbitflight back to the ThunderClan camp and tell Emberheart what's going on. Redface, I'd appreciate it if you came with me, and

Eaglepaw can go with Suncloud to wherever she thinks best. Is that fine with all of you?"

Redface gave Jaysong an approving nod. "Good plan, though I'd wish you wouldn't boss my clanmates around so much."

"You're on ThunderClan territory. I'm sure you'd do the same if we came into your territory," Jaysong meowed.

Before she set off for the stream, Brookpaw cast a glance at Rabbitflight. He seemed embarrassed, and he was twitching his ginger tail back and forth. "Come on," he meowed grumpily to Wildwind, who took a deep breath and darted after the ThunderClan cat.

"Let's get going," said Jaysong, and she and Redface slunk off into the undergrowth. Meanwhile Suncloud and Eaglepaw stayed put. With a jolt Brookpaw realized they knew almost nothing about the territory and probably had no idea where to go. *Maybe Jaysong should have had Rabbitflight stay with them*, she thought, but she knew Jaysong was a clever cat and one to be trusted.

"It's mostly just woods between the camp and the Thunderpath," she meowed to the two cats. "I'll be heading over in this direction," she gestured with her tail, "so why don't you look in this area the best you can? I'm sure my clanmates will send help once word reaches the camp."

Suncloud nodded shakily, and Eaglepaw dipped his head to her. "Fair enough."

With that settled, Brookpaw slipped into the brush and wove her way toward the stream, scenting for the kits the entire way.

Chapter Seven

[image] [image]

Brookpaw had still found no sign nor scent of the kits when she reached the stream. "Jadekit! Gullkit!" She yowled, but there was never any reply.

Oh kits, where have you gone? Although these were ShadowClan kits, she still felt the pang of worry that her clanmates must have experienced the day she escaped from the camp.

She went over the area several times, even looking up the Owl Tree once. *Surely I would have found something if they had been taken by an owl. Besides, owls are nocturnal*. Her breath rose around her face like mist, and she shivered. Leaf-bare would be setting in soon, and this was no weather for young kits on adventures. *They could die of cold!*

"Kits!" She gave one more desperate cry. "Where are you?!"

Nothing but the sound of the wind blowing through the dying leaves that still clung to the treetops. Brookpaw cursed. *Surely they haven't made it to Sunningrocks?*

She might as well check it out. Following the stream, she came to where it flowed into the river. Thankfully the water was low, which meant there wouldn't be a lot of dangerous rapids. The place seemed deserted. Thin clouds were blocking out the sun, and the cold breeze was worse out here in the open. Brookpaw searched all around the rocks, but found nothing but her own scent when she recrossed her tracks.

I'll just have to check back with the others, she decided, and began heading back in the direction of the camp.

"What's going on?" Emberheart meowed as Rabbitflight bounded across the clearing towards her, not with his patrol, but with a

ShadowClan cat she recognized as Wildwind. The small gray cat was out of breath, and Emberheart couldn't help but thinking his name didn't suit him very well.

"We found a patrol of ShadowClan cats when we were near the Thunderpath. They had crossed the border, but for once with a good reason," Rabbitflight meowed, his tail twitching.

Emberheart looked to Wildwind. "What's happened?"

"Suncloud's kits, Jadekit and Gullkit, went missing. We scented them near your border, then we lost the scent. After that, we ran into your patrol."

A group of ThunderClan cats had gathered around them, listening curiously. Wildwind looked around, narrowing his eyes. "Excuse me for asking, but where's Hawkstar?"

Emberheart hesitated, and was about to answer when the ThunderClan leader padded over to the scene. Wildwind gave a gasp as he saw the tom's scarred eye. "What happened?!" He asked, eyes wide.

"Whatever happened is not of importance now," Hawkstar meowed, "We have kits to find. Where did the others go, Rabbitflight?"

"Jaysong went with Redface to Snakerocks, Brookpaw went to the stream, and Suncloud and Eaglepaw were left to look wherever they wanted."

"Naturally," Hawkstar mused, and there was a glint of something in his gold-green eye. "Mapleclaw, take your apprentice and find Suncloud. She and Eaglepaw have no guide, as far as I understand. Ravenfoot, just in case, check near Tallpines. Sageclaw, look around the sandy hollow, and Fallingpaw, go with her. Is that all clear?"

The cats nodded, and with Wildwind they each made for the gorse tunnel. Only one cat stayed behind for a minute, and that was Sageclaw. Hawkstar saw her take a deep breath, then dash out after the others. *What's wrong with her*? He pondered, before turning to face Emberheart.

"You've done wonderfully as leader, but it's about time I take my proper place back," he meowed softly to her.

The dark tabby nodded. "When are you going to tell the rest of the clan?"

"Tonight. Before the gathering."

Emberheart yawned, stretching her legs. "Great StarClan, I'd nearly forgotten. It's going to be a long day..."

Brookpaw had bounded around the outskirts of the camp, hoping to find a patrol that could tell her what had happened. She nearly ran into Sageclaw in her rush, and she meowed an apology as the cream-colored she cat gave a hiss.

"You didn't find them then," she muttered, almost darkly.

"No," Brookpaw admitted, "I looked around Sunningrocks too. Nothing."

They were silent for a moment, and Brookpaw could hear the calls of the other cats as they searched. It was getting dark out. *We don't have a lot of time before nightfall*, she thought.

"Let's find Fallingpaw," Sageclaw suggested, "she shouldn't be far away."

The two cats had barely taken a step when a joyous yowl pierced the chilly evening air.

"I've found them!" It was Fallingpaw's voice, and Brookpaw couldn't help but give a sigh of relief. She and Sageclaw ran in the direction of the apprentice's voice, and found that several of the other cats, including Suncloud, had already gotten there.

Fallingpaw held a gray and white kit in her mouth, and Ravenfoot had had stepped in to help carry the other one, a light gray tabby. Together they brought them to Suncloud, who gave a yowl of delight and joy. Gently setting the kits down, Fallingpaw and

Ravenfoot backed away, letting the spotted queen reunite with them.

"You must never do that to me again!" Suncloud meowed, licking Gullkit's ears fiercely. Wrapping her tail around Jadekit, the queen turned to face Fallingpaw. "I cannot thank you enough for what you have done. What all of you have done."

At this time Redface and Jaysong returned. The ShadowClan deputy let out a long breath, and Brookpaw couldn't tell if he was relieved that the kits had been found or if he was disgusted that searching for them had taken up the entire afternoon.

"Suncloud?" He called to the queen. "As much as I hate to break up this happy reunion, it's getting late, and there still might be a gathering tonight. We and the others should really get going."

Suncloud gave one last grateful look to the ThunderClan cats, and then she gently picked up Gullkit by his scruff. Wildwind took Jadekit. Together with Eaglepaw they padded over to Redface, who turned to address Jaysong.

"ShadowClan thanks you for your kind act, and it will be remembered. But do not think this makes us allies, or that we'll be easy on you in the future." The red tom's eyes gleamed for a moment before he turned around and started heading back towards the Thunderpath, the other ShadowClan cats right behind him.

Well, Brookpaw thought, *I suppose that's as nice as ShadowClan cats get.* In truth she was just happy that the kits had been safe, and that it was Fallingpaw who had found them. No doubt she would be rewarded somehow. *Could she even become a warrior tonight? She certainly is old enough now, and has passed most of her training assessments*. Silently she padded back to camp with the other cats, lost in her own thoughts. Many of the other cats were congratulating Fallingpaw, who insisted she had just been lucky and flattened her fur in embarrassment.

For some strange reason, Redface had strayed into Brookpaw's thoughts. She had never seen him before, yet he looked strangely familiar. Perhaps it was the way he held his head or something. His

scar made it hard to tell what his original face had looked like. *Why am I even thinking about him? I should be congratulating Fallingpaw, no matter how much she seems to wants us not to.*

She didn't get the chance before they were all slipping one by one back down the gorse tunnel, ready to give the news to the cats back at camp.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock for a meeting!' Hawkstar yowled. He had regained his usual confidence and sat proudly upon his perch, looking down at his clanmates.

The cats whispered among themselves, all wondering the same thing; was Hawkstar back for good?

"Cats of ThunderClan, it is about time I take my place back as leader. I give my thanks to Aspenglow, Emberheart, and Stormclaw. Without you three, we might never have dealt with things so smoothly after the border fight. And now, with that said, it is about time I introduce you to ThunderClan's newest warrior."

Brookpaw purred. *So I* was *right.* Beside her, Amberkit gave her an excited look. Fallingpaw was his half sister, though you wouldn't have known unless you looked at their eyes. They were different colors, yes, but they both were the same shape and had the same kind glow.

"Fallingpaw, do you promise to follow the warrior code and guard and protect your clan until your last breath?" Hawkstar meowed.

The light tabby nodded. "I do."

"Then from this moment forward you shall be known as Fallingleaf. You have done a great thing today, and neither ThunderClan nor ShadowClan will forget it." The leader jumped off the Highrock and set his chin atop her head, and then drew back, telling her that she could come to the gathering tonight if the sky cleared up, but she would begin her vigil straight after when they returned to camp.

For now she would at least start it.

I'm sure StarClan won't mind one exception, Brookpaw thought. Honestly she wished the clouds would stay, because she was dead tired and didn't feel like going to a gathering, if she was even invited. But it did indeed look like it was clearing up, and she could make out the faint light of a star from the thinning clouds.

"What do you think about her new name?" Amberkit asked quietly, his orange eyes huge in a desperate attempt to stay awake.

Brookpaw smiled at him. "I think it's beautiful."

They were silent for a moment.

"I wonder what ours will be," the kit pondered.

"I bet you will be named after your eyes."

Amberkit sighed. "I know. Grasscloud thinks that too." Yawning, he stretched forward. "I'm going to the nursery. I'll fall asleep out here if I don't."

"Then go," Brookpaw meowed. She gave her friend a lick on the head, and went off to find Ravenfoot.

Please, tell me I'm not going this time, she thought, *I'm just as tired as Amberkit.* She found Ravenfoot talking to Hawkstar. Patiently, she waited a little bit away, flicking her tail back and forth to keep herself entertained. After a few moments, Ravenfoot came over to her. His green eyes looked tired as well, and for once he couldn't seem to pull of his "disappearing" trick.

"Lucky you," he meowed, "we aren't going tonight." He scanned her face for signs of disappointment, but found none.

Brookpaw yawned. "Thank StarClan, I barely feel like I could make it to the sandy hollow without falling asleep. You look tired too."

"I am," her mentor admitted, "but we'll be up early tomorrow. Aspenglow said Leafpaw is ready for training again, and Minkpelt and I agreed to take you two to learn some new fighting tactics."

She nodded. "Okay, sounds good." She let out another wide yawn. "See you in the morning then."

Brookpaw fell asleep as soon as she laid down in her nest.

Chapter Eight

[image] [image]

A moon had passed since Fallingleaf had become a warrior, and since the ShadowClan kits had gone missing. During that time, Ravenfoot had trained Brookpaw hard, and there was hardly ever a day when she didn't come back to camp sore and tired. The reason behind this was simple; RiverClan had upped their antics around Sunningrocks, and Hawkstar has asked all the mentors to in turn train their apprentices thoroughly in the art of fighting.

Brookpaw, although she knew it was necessary, didn't like it much. She could hardly teach Amberkit anything now because she was either busy, or too tired and sore to teach him well. The good thing was that he would be an apprentice soon, and would have a mentor, so he wouldn't be relying on her for something she couldn't always give. He seemed to understand though, and didn't say anything about it on the days Brookpaw felt like mouse dung.

"Maybe tomorrow Ravenfoot will let up a bit," he'd mew, knowing that is was probably untrue. Ravenfoot was an easy-going cat for the most part, but when things got serious, he got down to business.

"Not bad, but not good enough," he meowed as Brookpaw just failed to pin him down once more.

She sighed, took a deep breath, and launched herself again, trying to swipe his legs from out under him. But Ravenfoot leaped out of the way, leaving her to land ungracefully in the dirt. This time, however, she did not stop to catch her breath. Turning quickly, she lunged again, but it was a trick. Her goal was to miss and take her mentor by surprise.

While Ravenfoot was still leaping away, she launched at him in mid air, landing on his back. The red tom was unprepared, and stumbled slightly as he landed. Brookpaw took the opportunity to swipe his feet out from under him with her right forepaw and

pinned him down on his side triumphantly.

"Very good," Ravenfoot meowed, "But why did you pin me on my side?"

"Because if I pinned you on your back, you could rake my stomach your claws more easily."

Ravenfoot took a deep breath. "Good. Now let go."

The session went on for the rest of the afternoon, and Brookpaw returned to camp with two finches she had caught afterwards. She brought them to the elders, who looked pleased.

"With all you apprentices training for battle, we thought you'd start to neglect us," Twigtail meowed amusedly.

Brookpaw purred, but it was half-hearted. "Of course we won't. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Could you please fetch Duskpelt some mouse bile?" Shalefire asked. "She was complaining about a tick before she fell asleep. I'll get it off later, but it would be better to put the bile on it first."

She nodded and exited the hollow log and made her way towards the medicine den. Aspenglow was inside, sorting herbs. Her light blue eyes met Brookpaw's as she entered the den.

"What do you need?" She asked.

"Duskpelt needs some mouse bile for a tick."

Aspenglow said nothing but picked up a leaf-wrapped substance and laid it front of the apprentice.

"Thank you," Brookpaw meowed, and hurriedly exited the den. Aspenglow was either in a good mood or a bad one, and today didn't seem like one of her good days. In fact, Brookpaw hadn't seen her look happy since the border quarrels had increased. *I suppose she's just worried about her clan, like we all are*. But was that a good reason to be irritated all the time?

Shaking her head, Brookpaw returned to the elders den to drop off the mouse bile. Shalefire thanked her, and then she left once again. Spotting Leafpaw, she went over to the calico she-cat. She and Brookpaw had actually become friends in the last moon or so. Leafpaw was less stubborn and rude than her sister, and after spending some time with her, Brookpaw decided she wasn't half bad.

"You haven't eaten yet, have you?" She called to Leafpaw.

The calico shook her head. "No, why?"

"Do you want to go hunting for a bit before our mentors go make us battle train again?"

Leafpaw twitched her whiskers. "I don't see why not."

They slipped out the gorse tunnel and into the forest, breathing in the cold, crisp air. It seemed to be threatening to snow, as the clouds were gray and dark.

"Where should we go?" Leafpaw asked, her green eyes glittering.

"I was thinking over by Tallpines. I don't think any of the hunting patrols have been over there for a while."

"Hopefully we won't run into any kittypets."

"Well," Brookpaw meowed, "I was told that only some are dangerous, and that most are just lazy and fat and hardly ever go outside, so I think we'll be alright."

They set off through the woods, taking care to avoid going near the sandy hollow. The clouds had become even darker and thicker than before. *I wish it would just snow*. They neither saw nor heard any signs of prey on their way, which was discouraging.

"Hopefully it won't be like last winter," Leafpaw meowed quietly. "You probably don't remember much about it, since you were so little then. The warriors could barely find any prey for almost a moon..." she shivered, "Berrypaw and I were both off of milk by then, but it was still pretty bad."

Brookpaw nodded slowly, ears pricked up. "Shh. Do you hear that?" She hissed.

Leafpaw stopped and listened for a moment, then nodded. "It sounds like a cat walking through the undergrowth."

A rogue? Brookpaw guessed. Surely a kittypet wouldn't stray this far into the woods...

"We should chase them off," Leafpaw meowed.

Slowly they crept forward towards the direction the sound had come from, trying to avoid stepping on the many dead leaves that were scattered across the forest floor. *We'd be caught for sure if we stepped on one of those*. The two cats heard no more unusual noises, and when they arrived at the location the first sound had come from, they found nothing but a very faint scent.

"Whoever it was, they smell like twolegplace," Brookpaw meowed, scrunching up her nose.

"Probably a rogue," Leafpaw muttered, "we'll have to see if we can pick up the scent anywhere else."

The trail that they were following was so faint that it seemed as if the cat had walked here the day before, not just a few minutes ago. They lost it completely near Tallpines.

"Mouse dung!" Leafpaw spat. "Whoever it was, they're great at disguising their scent. We'll tell Emberheart about it later. In the meantime, we ought to be hunting."

Brookpaw sighed, disappointed. *I just want to know who it was*. She couldn't help but thinking back to her strange dreams of the black tom and the red she-cat. It couldn't have been one of them, surely... Her thoughts drifted as she spied a pine squirrel scrambling around on the nettle-covered ground. Giving Leafpaw a *I got this look*, she crept up on the squirrel as far as she could, then dashed forward, trying to reach her prey before it climbed up the tree. The squirrel hesitated one second too long. He'd barely had time to turn around before Brookpaw delivered the killing blow.

"Nice!" Leafpaw called from behind her. "Let's go see what else we can find."

The two cats returned to the camp late that afternoon. Brookpaw had managed to catch a mouse as well as her squirrel, and Leafpaw had killed two juncos. Minkpelt gave them an approving nod as they dropped their catches in the fresh-kill pile.

"Good work, you two. But I'm afraid this still doesn't get you out of battle training this evening," the long-haired she cat meowed.

Leafpaw gave a tiny groan, but said nothing to protest. "We should tell Emberheart about that weird scent we found," she hissed quietly.

They found the deputy organizing the night patrol that would leave later in the evening. After she had finished, the two apprentices padded up to her. "We found an odd scent while we were out hunting," Leafpaw meowed.

"Odd in what way?"

"Well, it smelled like a rogue," said Brookpaw, "but it was really faint. We're sure we heard a cat in the undergrowth, but when we got there the cat was gone and the scent smelled like it had been there for days. We lost the scent completely in Tallpines."

Emberheart closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "We're already having so much trouble with RiverClan. We certainly don't need trouble with rogues, too. I'll tell the night patrol to check out the twolegplace border tonight. Right now, that is all I can do. We can't spare enough cats to lead a proper investigation at the moment, so it will have to wait. Thank you, you two." With that said, Emberheart headed over to Hawkstar, probably to give him the news.

"I'm hungry. You want anything?" Leafpaw asked, yawning.

Brookpaw shook her head. "No thanks, not before battle training."

The calico shrugged and headed over towards the fresh-kill pile.

Brookpaw instead went to the nursery, where she found Amberkit sitting outside of the entrance, eyes closed. He seemed remarkably calm (though he wasn't usually hyper), and she wondered if he was asleep. But he leapt up when she was within four tail-lengths of him, orange eyes as wide as ever.

"Hi!" He meowed. "What's up?"

Brookpaw couldn't help but to notice that he had grown enormously in the last moon or so. He was no longer a tiny, fluffy kit, but a young cat almost ready to become an apprentice. She wished she was older for a moment, thinking that she could continue to train him as his mentor. *But I'm not, and there are plenty of warriors who will train him just fine*. At least she had given him a head start.

"Oh, hunting, training, the usual," she replied, humor lacing her voice.

Amberkit purred. "So, Ravenfoot isn't giving you a break?"

"You know he won't, and I don't blame him. RiverClan is being extremely hostile, and if we don't learn all this stuff-"

"I get it," he mowed gently, "I was only teasing."

"That's not a very nice thing to tease about," Brookpaw said, and shoved him playfully. Amberkit grinned at her and repositioned himself.

"Who do you think will mentor me?"

She began trading lines in the dirt with her claws. "I don't know, maybe Stormclaw or Snowblaze. Those two are great fighters, and since RiverClan will probably still be causing problems when you become an apprentice, they make the most sense."

Amberkit tilted his head as he thought. "They don't sound too bad..."

"Stormclaw's and bit serious, but he is very kind. And Snowblaze is Rabbitflight's father. He's kind of like a mature version of his

son."

"I don't think Rabbitflight will *ever* be mature," he meowed.

"Every once in a while I see his more serious side, but you're right, I don't think he'll ever completely abandon his kit-like nature."

Amberkit smirked at her. "You sound pretty serious yourself right now."

Brookpaw couldn't argue with that. She was about to say something else when Ravenfoot appeared, as usual, out of nowhere.

"Seriously Ravenfoot, you need to teach me how to do that," she meowed, her tail still spiked up in alarm.

"Yeah," Amberkit agreed, "think of how many enemy cats you could scare away without even unsheathing your claws!"

Ravenfoot rolled his eyes. "I don't think it's quite *that* scary, but thank you anyway. Come on, Brookpaw, we're joining Minkpelt and Leafpaw for a night lesson."

At least I won't be fighting Berrypaw in the dark.

Brookpaw returned at moonhigh. She was exhausted and only really wanted to get some sleep. The session had gone well, and Ravenfoot seemed to have been pleased with her progress. She supposed they would be going to the gathering tomorrow, considering they hadn't last time. *Meeting the other clans there ought to be more interesting than just seeing them on the border*. Curling up in her nest, she fell asleep immediately, only to have the black cat appear in her dreams again.

This time she actually tried to approach him. "Who are you?!" She called, but the black tom only laughed and smiled evilly at her. *Who are you?* Still laughing, he turned and ran off into the dark, leaving her alone.

Shivering, Brookpaw woke. It was still early, but after her unsettling dream she felt utterly awake. Being careful not to step on any of her denmates, she left the den to take in some of the cool night air. Rabbitflight was on guard duty outside the gorse tunnel, and she nodded to him as she began to pace around the camp.

"What's up with you?" The white cat hissed.

"Just a bad dream," she muttered, "I'm fine."

Rabbitflight looked skeptical. "If you were fine, I don't think you would be out here in the cold, wide awake."

Brookpaw knew she couldn't fool him, but she still didn't want to talk about what she had seen. Not with him, anyway. It just didn't seem right, even though he was her friend.

"What? Did you dream of a battle? Of someone you know dying?"

"N-no."

He looked at her earnestly. "Then what was in it that was so bad?"

The silver tabby paused. *Would it really be so bad to tell him?*

"I dreamt of a black cat," she meowed, realizing how stupid it sounded.

"A black cat doing what?"

"Laughing at me. And sometimes there's a red she-cat too. I'm not talking about a humorous laugh, I'm talking about some sort of evil laugh. I don't know why, but it just chills me to the bone."

"No offense," Rabbitflight meowed, "But you'll get chilled to the bone out here, too. I've been out here all night and it is *cold*."

Brookpaw laughed, relaxing a little. "I'll stay out here with you if you want. There's no way I am falling back asleep."

Rabbitflight yawned and stretched forward, unsheathing his claws a little. "Thanks, it kind of sucks to be out here by yourself all night."

Slowly, light started to appear on the horizon. The other cats began to stir. They could hear them moving around in their nests. Hawkstar was the first out, pushing his way through the lichen that draped the entrance to his den.

"What are you doing out here, Brookpaw?" He meowed.

She swished her tail. "Couldn't sleep. So I came out here to make myself useful."

Rabbitflight shot her a look of mock hurt. "You didn't just come out here to see me?"

Shut up, you annoying furball.

"Very well. Rabbitflight, you're welcome to rest a bit before helping with the training today." Hawkstar's good eye gleamed, and he seemed ready for the long day ahead.

"Thank you, Hawkstar," Rabbitflight meowed. He dipped his head to the cream-colored tom, yet managed to grin widely at Brookpaw before heading over to the warriors den. Rolling her eyes, she stretched, waiting for her mentor to wake. *It shouldn't be too long, Hawkstar and Emberheart are about the only cats who get up before him.*

Right on cue, Emberheart padded out of the den. Ravenfoot was right behind her. His green eyes met hers in less than a second, and he looked slightly surprised to see her.

"Couldn't sleep," she meowed quietly, hoping her answer would be enough for him not to pry into her business, like Rabbitflight had managed to do.

Ravenfoot nodded. He looked around the frosty clearing, watching as Sageclaw and Minkpelt emerged out the warriors den. "You're not going to have any battle training today," the black-legged tom meowed casually.

Brookpaw's eyes widened. "You're joking," she replied, hardly daring to believe it.

"Oh, I'm quite serious," Ravenfoot meowed, smirking. "Instead we'll be patrolling this morning and hunting in the afternoon."

"Excellent," she purred, sitting up very straight, "who will we be patrolling with?"

"Mistfur, if she gets up."

Brookpaw heard a hiss of annoyance. "I'm up, you impatient furball!" Mistfur padded up to them, her silvery coat sparkling like frost. *This ought to be interesting.* Mistfur had been Rabbitflight's mentor, and she was curious to see how she acted outside of camp. One thing Brookpaw did know was that she wasn't a morning cat, and the silver tabby could tell this morning wasn't going to be any different.

"Hi, Mistfur," she mewed.

The she-cat gave her nod of greeting, and proceeded to shove Ravenfoot playfully. "Learn to be a little patient, it wouldn't kill you."

Her mentor gave a sigh and meowed, "Come on, we need to get going before the sun's up."

The three cats crawled through the gorse tunnel and stepped into the forest, breathing in the chilly air.

"Which border are we patrolling?" Brookpaw meowed quietly, assuming it would be the ShadowClan border.

"The RiverClan border," Ravenfoot replied.

"Do we even have enough cats?"

Mistfur glanced at her. "Are you suggesting two full-grown ThunderClan Warriors cannot fight off another patrol of cats?"

"No, but I figured since we've been having so many border issues

with them-"

Thankfully Ravenfoot intercepted before a full out argument began. "If we do happen upon a RiverClan patrol, we will not provoke them or try to get into a fight. Unfortunately, we have to cut the patrol size down since there are so many cats helping out with training. Just remain calm, and don't let them scare you. Okay?"

Brookpaw nodded, but she remained uneasy. The nagging feeling that something was just wrong didn't disappear, so she tried to hide it the best she could. Sunningrocks was just ahead of them now. Both Ravenfoot and Mistfur seemed fine. *How can they be so calm!? Do they really think RiverClan is just going to be "nice" for one day?*

The three cats stopped at the treeline, peering through the brambles across the clearing. They were greeted with a disturbing sight. Four or five RiverClan warriors were sunning themselves on the rocks, each stretched out lazily in the last beams of the leaf-fall sun. *How are they even warm? It's freezing out here.*

Ravenfoot let out a long, sharp hiss. "Mouse dung, they're even worse than before."

"Let's go back to camp to get some more cats, please, before they see us," Brookpaw begged, "We'd be fighting two at a time as it is."

Her mentor looked like he was about to agree when a large, white RiverClan tom scented the air.

"We aren't alone," he meowed.

A glossy black tom stood up. "Excellent, Iceheart. ThunderClan has come to see the show."

Brookpaw nudged at Ravenfoot and Mistfur again. "More cats. *Now*."

But Mistfur was already bristling with anger. "That little-"

"Keep it together, Mistfur, he's trying to provoke you.

Brookpaw's right, we need more cats."

"Aww, too scared to come out of your forest?" Crowstar sneered. "Typical. I would of thought, with Hawkstar leading you now, you guys would be a little, I don't know—*fiercer*."

The RiverClan leader jumped off one of the rocks. He was followed by the white tom, Iceheart, a black she-cat, a young tabby tom, and a mottled brown she-cat.

"Go back to camp and get more cats," Ravenfoot meowed to Brookpaw.

"But if I go now it'll be two against five!"

"Then be quick," he said dryly.

We should've gone back before they scented us, she thought, *I can't go now and leave them!*

"I'm staying with you guys," she meowed certainly.

Ravenfoot was about to argue with her when the black she-cat leapt at him, forcing him to turn and face her in combat. Iceheart went for Mistfur, and the tabby tom advanced towards Brookpaw.

"How many times do we have to tell you," Crowstar said, "that Sunningrocks belongs to *us?!"* He joined the black she-cat in attacking Ravenfoot.

Brookpaw wanted desperately to help him, but the tabby was keeping her from doing so. He'd managed to block her every time she tried to dart around him, so she decided she would have to fight him. One last time, she tried to get around him, but he blocked her again. Brookpaw took the advantage and slid under the much larger cat, raking her claws at his stomach.

The tabby screeched, and tried to leap at her, but she rolled out of reach at the last moment, leaping to her feet. *These RiverClan cats are slow. Maybe they just eat too much fish*. The tom turned around and launched himself at her again. This time Brookpaw jumped straight up in the air, letting herself land on his back as went under

her. She sunk her teeth into the back of his neck as he tried to shake her off, and the tabby let out another screech. Brookpaw let go and jumped off. The tom didn't try to fight her again. Instead he ran towards the river in retreat, still yowling.

That seemed way too easy. Aren't they training their warriors properly? Remembering her mentor, Brookpaw turned to launch herself at the black she-cat. The cat gave a hiss of surprise as the apprentice tackled her, screeching in anger. For one brief moment she saw Mistfur struggling to fight both Iceheart and the mottled brown she-cat before she was clawed by her opponent.

"You should be easy to deal with," the black cat hissed, her green eyes gleaming.

Didn't you just see your clanmate run back across the river? However, Brookpaw kept her thoughts to herself as she waited for the she-cat to make the first move. It was then that she realized who this cat was. She was Crowstar's sister, Willowlight. Brookpaw remembered hearing about her from some of the older warriors. *She has no mercy. Even for kits*. That's what they had said.

Willowlight grinned evilly at her, and for a moment she was reminded of the cat from her dream. Then the black cat leapt at her, and this time Brookpaw had no time to move out of the way. Claws dug into her fur as Willowlight tackled her, pinning the apprentice to the ground. Desperately Brookpaw raked her claws at the she-cat's stomach, like she had done to the tabby. Willowlight let go, but she did not screech despite the bleeding wounds on her stomach.

"Not bad, but that's a beginner's move, isn't it?" She hissed before she grabbed Brookpaw's scruff and managed to throw her several tail-lengths away.

The impact hurt, but it also knocked all the breath out of the silver tabby. She took a deep breath and held it, trying to fool Willowlight into thinking she had won. Brookpaw could feel blood running down her side. The scent of it made her want to gag, but she fought back the sensation, hoping to StarClan the trick would work.

She heard Ravenfoot screech her name, and felt the presence of Willowlight standing over her. Brookpaw may not have been able to sneak around like her mentor, but being around him had taught her to be able to detect the presence of other cats very easily. Willowlight made no move. Although she couldn't see her, Brookpaw knew the she-cat was probably smirking, satisfied she'd been able to take her out so quickly. *If only*, the silver tabby thought.

She felt Willowlight's presence disappear as she returned to help her brother. Brookpaw took the moment to leap to her feet and silently launch herself at the black-she cat. She landed on Willowlight's back and used her right forepaw to swipe her feet from out under her. Willowlight hissed and tumbled to the ground. Pinning her down on her side like Ravenfoot had taught her, Brookpaw hissed into the she-cat's ear, "Not so easy to deal with, huh?"

Willowlight tried to get up, but her legs were at the wrong angle to get a grip on the frosty grass.

"Stop!" Brookpaw screeched at Crowstar, who was still battling Ravenfoot. "Stop, or I'll do something worse than pinning her."

The black tom turned to face her, his yellow eyes widening as he saw his sister on the ground, bleeding. "Are you threatening to kill her? Has ThunderClan decided not to follow the warrior code anymore?" He managed to sneer at her.

At that moment one last defiant screech came from Mistfur. Brookpaw saw her crumple to the ground as Iceheart and the she-cat attacked her once more. The silver cat did not stir. A sick feeling rose in Brookpaw's stomach. *She's dead. These stupid cats killed her over a border*. The sick feeling gave way to silent anger as she thought about what Applefall had said when she'd battled the RiverClan cats.

"This has gone way beyond a border fight. Apprentices shouldn't lose their ears *in border fights. Leaders should not lose an* eye *in* border fights*!"*

"*You're* one to talk about disobeying the warrior code," she hissed at Crowstar, doing her best to hide the rage that was consuming her.

Crowstar didn't seem to know what to say. She had put him on the spot. He glanced at Mistfur's body for a moment, then beckoned his warriors over to him. Brookpaw thought she saw a brief look of guilt on his face, but it was gone as soon as it had come.

"Let her go," he meowed to her, referring to Willowlight.

"Not until you agree to stop fighting for these stupid rocks," she meowed.

"Fine, fine, just let her go!"

"Do better than that."

Crowstar sighed heavily. "I, Crowstar of RiverClan, swear not to battle over Sunningrocks again. Is that good enough for you?"

Brookpaw didn't answer him, but let go of Willowlight, who hissed at her as she padded away.

She heard the black she-cat hiss quietly to her brother, "You fool. You should have let her hurt me and then killed her."

Giving her and Ravenfoot nasty looks, Willowlight turned and began heading for the river. Crowstar followed her, along with Iceheart and the brown she-cat, who Brookpaw learned was called Carpfur. Neither she nor her mentor moved until they saw the cats cross the river.

Ravenfoot looked like he wanted to say something to her, but instead he knelt by Mistfur's side and meowed something Brookpaw couldn't hear. Her rage had settled back down to the sick feeling, and it worsened as she saw Mistfur's body again.

"We need to return her to the camp," Ravenfoot meowed blandly.

She nodded. Together they slipped Mistfur onto their backs, and

began the silent and depressing journey back to the ThunderClan camp, being careful to walk together so the body wouldn't fall.

The one thing Brookpaw did say was, "How are we going to get her through the gorse tunnel?"

Her mentor gave her a grave look. "We won't."

Chapter Nine

[image] [image]

The cats held an early vigil for Mistfur that evening due to the gathering. The cats that had been particularly close to her, like Duskpelt, her mother, and Rabbitflight would stay behind. Hawkstar and many of the other cats wanted to stay behind too, but they knew it would look suspicious if ThunderClan didn't show up at the gathering. So the leader chose a small group of cats to go with him; Emberheart, because she was the deputy, Stormclaw, Lilystream, Snowblaze, Fallingleaf, Ravenfoot, and Brookpaw.

She wished she could have gone to her first gathering in good spirits, but that was not the case. Brookpaw still felt sick as she padded alongside Ravenfoot towards Fourtrees.

"Despite whatever happened, you fought amazingly today," her mentor murmured.

Maybe I did, but Mistfur's still dead.

Ravenfoot said something else to her, but she wasn't listening. Her thoughts had traveled back to earlier, when they had told the camp Mistfur was dead. Duskpelt had let out a yowl of agony.

"She can't be dead! Where is she?! What happened?!"

Brookpaw had never heard the old she-cat be so loud. She had gestured numbly with her tail, pointing towards the gorse tunnel. "We couldn't get her body through the tunnel," she meowed miserably.

It was then Rabbitflight had emerged from the warriors den. "What's happened?"

"Mistfur's dead." Ravenfoot had answered this time.

Her friend had given a screech of disbelief and followed

Duskpelt out through the gorse tunnel.

Shaking her thoughts away, Brookpaw tried to focus on the path ahead of her. The forest was thinning out. They were almost at Fourtrees. Ravenfoot had given up trying to talk to her, and was now walking side by side with Lilystream. Their pelts were brushing, and they were chatting quietly to each other. She heard Lilystream laugh.

How can you be so light-hearted after what happened today? She thought, but deep inside she knew it was probably better that they weren't all depressed and irritated. This was a gathering, after all. But she could imagine how Crowstar was going to twist the story of the battle tonight and make it seem like ThunderClan was all at fault.

Berrypaw came up alongside her. "You smell bad. None of the other apprentices are going to want to hang around you tonight."

Of course I smell, I'm covered in herbs you mouse brain! Her injuries hadn't been serious, but she had a large cut on her flank thanks to Willowlight.

"None of the apprentices are going to want to hang around you either if you insult them every five seconds," she replied, keeping her tone dull and uninterested.

Berrypaw shrugged. "A real warrior can take some criticism."

"I'm covered in herbs, what did you expect?!"

The red tabby ignored her and padded ahead, catching up to her mentor, Mapleclaw. Rolling her eyes, Brookpaw turned her attention back to Ravenfoot and Lilystream. They were talking to each other very quietly, but she could hear a piece of their conversation every now and then.

"It'll be nice to talk to Suncloud again," Lilystream murmured. "I wonder how her kits are doing."

Brookpaw couldn't hear Ravenfoot's reply. In all honesty, she just found it hard to believe he hadn't caught her listening in on

them yet. He usually was so alert. *I guess he lets his guard down with Lilystream.* In a way, it was nice to see him like this, relaxed and friendly.

Deciding to leave them alone, Brookpaw dropped behind, taking up the rear. They were almost at Fourtrees now, and she could smell the scents of the other clans. Mostly ShadowClan. She'd only met one ShadowClan apprentice before, and that was Eaglepaw. *I wonder how many there are*. She would find out soon enough.

Slowly they descended into the hollow where the four great oak trees stood. The sight of them never ceased to amaze her, and gradually the sad numbness that had gripped her let go as she became distracted. As she suspected, ShadowClan was already here. They barely seemed affected by the cold breeze that was blowing, and their eyes glowed with something that might have been hostility.

Hawkstar exchanged greetings with Copperstar. To her surprise, the ShadowClan leader seemed very friendly, and he didn't comment on Hawkstar's eye. *Wildwind probably told him about it*. Brookpaw searched the clearing, looking for any other apprentices. She found Berrypaw talking to a large, coal-colored tom named Siltpelt. His amber eyes met hers for a second, and Brookpaw forced herself to return the glance. There was something unsettling in those amber eyes. It didn't take the tom long to look away, but she found herself letting out a deep breath.

"Yeah, he can have that effect on you the first time you meet him." A small orange tabby she-cat was padding towards her. "My name's Breezepaw. I haven't seen you before."

Brookpaw relaxed a little. "You wouldn't have, this is my first gathering. I'm Brookpaw."

Breezepaw studied her for a moment with her yellow eyes. "So *you're* the one Troutsplash is gabbing about."

Isn't Troutsplash the brown tabby I fought today at Sunningrocks?

"Come with me," Breezepaw gestured with her tail. She lead

Brookpaw across the clearing to where the RiverClan cats had slunk in. Weaving in and out of the glossy-pelted cats, they stopped near a small group who were all listening excitedly to a brown tom. *Yeah, that's him.*

"So she leaps onto my back and bites into my scruff. I think to myself, *this will be easy*, and try to shake her off. But it doesn't work, and she bites deeper into my scruff. At this point I'll admit I panicked a bit-"

"If I didn't know Troutsplash very well, I would say he has a thing for you, but he's always like this," Breezepaw murmured.

Brookpaw felt her pelt heat up a little bit. "What do you mean?"

"He tells stories that he loses in. He admits that he's not the best warrior out there, and compliments cats from other clans."

The silver tabby turned to look at Troutsplash again. He told about his escape across the river, and to her surprise the other cats didn't seem angry or disappointed. *They just love to hear him talk*, she realized. Rabbitflight could be like that. He could be telling you that he hated you, yet you'd still sit there and listen to him intently until he'd finished.

"WindClan is here!"

A bunch of thin, long-legged cats bounded into the clearing. They smelled of sage and of the moor. Brookpaw breathed in their scent, trying to remember it for later. But the smell also made her want to run out in the open, to escape from the cover of the trees and be...well, *free*.

A black apprentice came over to them, his yellow eyes wide.

"Oh hey, Swiftpaw. What's up?" Breezepaw meowed.

"The sky, usually," the tom meowed dryly, but there was humor in his voice.

Breezepaw rolled her eyes, and turned to Brookpaw. "This is Swiftpaw. Swiftpaw, this is Brookpaw."

"Hi," Swiftpaw meowed shyly.

"Hey," she replied.

"Oh look! The gathering's starting," Breezepaw hissed, "come on, we have to get back to our clans!"

The three apprentices rushed back to find their mentors in the crowd. Brookpaw found Ravenfoot sitting near Mapleclaw and Berrypaw.

"Meet any other cats?" He asked her quietly.

She nodded.

"Let the gathering begin!" Smokestar, the WindClan leader, yowled. All of the leaders had jumped up onto the huge rock that sat in the clearing, and we're gazing down at all of the cats. She'd seen Crowstar before obviously, and Copperstar earlier, but Brookpaw had never laid eyes on Smokestar. He was a thin, gray tom with a white muzzle and underbelly.

"WindClan has been doing fine," he began. She heard some RiverClan cats snort, as if Smokestar had told them the funniest joke they'd ever heard.

So it's not just ThunderClan that is having problems with RiverClan, she thought.

"The rabbits on the moor are still running, and we have not gone hungry for a long time. I hope it is the same way in your clans. Eveningpelt has given birth to two healthy kits; Peachkit and Cranekit. WindClan welcomes them, and is grateful that they are well and happy."

I would be a little worried if I had kits when it was nearly leaf-bare.

"That is all I have to say," Smokestar meowed, and stepped back to let Crowstar speak.

"RiverClan is excellent at the moment. Like WindClan, we also have some new kits to welcome." Crowstar's eyes shone happily,

and Brookpaw was honestly surprised. Wasn't he going to insult them somehow?

"Greenwillow has given birth to my kits; Cloverkit, Swankit, and Pigeonkit."

Some of the cats muttered quiet *congratulations,* but the chilly air seemed to have dampened their mood.

Crowstar didn't notice, or he simply didn't care. "We have been having some border issues, but they have been resolved very recently."

Once again the thought of Mistfur's death pierced her like a moorland breeze. *At least he didn't change the story. Or even tell it for that matter.*

"But don't think you can get away with anything now, because we will still be watching," Crowstar finished.

Hawkstar stepped forward to speak. His gold-green eye scanned the crowd of cats, as if to check and see that everyone was listening.

"Despite however Crowstar has made it seem, these border issues of his have not been light-hearted."

Oh StarClan, he's going to chew him out! Part of her thought it wasn't worth it, but another was cheering him on.

Brookpaw heard the cats briefly whisper to each other as they waited to hear what Hawkstar would say next. She also sensed that the RiverClan cats were becoming uneasy.

"Almost two moons ago now, we fought RiverClan for Sunningrocks. Yes, ever since the river changed it's course, these fights have never been uncommon. But this was more than a little skirmish. One of our apprentices lost an ear. I lost vision in one of my eyes, as you probably have noticed. And today, in another border fight, one of my warriors was killed."

A few of the apprentices gasped. "But that's against the warrior code!"

The sense of unease had spread through most of the clans by now. The WindClan cats seemed furious.

Smokestar stepped forward again, his light green eyes shining in the moonlight. "This is true for my clan also," he meowed, "We lost Fuzztail to the claws of a RiverClan warrior after a hunting patrol came over our border."

"Well maybe," a light ginger RiverClan tom spat, "ThunderClan and WindClan are too weak and poorly trained to defend their own borders!"

Brookpaw felt Ravenfoot tense beside her. In fact, every clan but ShadowClan was bristling now. She herself wanted to go over there and swipe the tom's ear, but she knew that would get them nowhere. Besides, there was supposed to be a truce tonight.

Hawkstar was about to reply to the ginger cat's comment, but was interrupted by Redface. The ShadowClan deputy gave a yowl that quieted down all the cats for a moment.

"Don't forget, Coyotefoot, that it was Hawkstar and a group of ThunderClan cats who saved your lives during the battle of the wolves!"

The battle of the wolves. Brookpaw had been told tales about it by the elders, but in truth it hadn't happened too long ago. In fact, her mother had been an apprentice at the time. A pack of wolves had moved in outside of ThunderClan and RiverClan territory. Cats from all the different clans had teamed together to drive them out. But Applefall never brought it up, just like she refused to talk about Brookpaw's father. She loved her mother dearly, but sometimes it drove her crazy not knowing much about her mother's, or even her own past.

Coyotefoot didn't seem to know how to reply. But, before he could, Crowstar stepped forward again.

"I realize RiverClan has been a bit harsh lately, but I have sworn not to be so brutal about the border issues," he meowed hurriedly, trying to settle down the angry cats.

For a brief moment Hawkstar's gaze fell upon Brookpaw. His expression was unreadable, but before she knew it he was facing Crowstar again.

"Let us settle down," Copperstar yowled, "there is a truce tonight!"

Slowly the cats became quiet, yet they were still glaring at each other. Once again Brookpaw was surprised at the easy-going nature of the ShadowClan leader. *I wonder how it will be when Redface becomes leader*. From what she had seen of him, Redface was a decent cat, but he didn't seem to have the kindness of Copperstar.

Brookpaw noticed Willowlight was glaring at her. *Oh come on, grow up*. She stared right back at her until finally the black cat looked away, choosing instead to glare at Hawkstar.

"Well," meowed Copperstar, "ShadowClan has yet to speak. Would any of you like to quarrel a bit more before I talk?"

Brookpaw felt like meowing, *Willowlight would, sir*, but she kept her mouth shut. Nearby she heard Breezepaw snicker at her leader's comment.

"Good. We've had a few minor flooding problems in our territory, but thankfully not anywhere near our camp. We believe the problem was caused by twolegs. They'll fix it soon enough, if so. ShadowClan also has one new warrior; Siltpelt!"

The cats temporarily forgot their grudges as they called the dark tom's name. Siltpelt sat tall and proudly, as if he'd just been told he was the new ShadowClan leader.

"He looks a bit smug," she whispered to Ravenfoot, who nodded in agreement.

"At the moment my clan is strong and prepared for the leaf-bare ahead. I wish the other clan luck as leaf-bare begins it's long, cruel game," Copperstar finished, and stepped back.

Brookpaw glanced up at her mentor. "Now what?"

"Usually everyone socializes a bit until the leaders say it's time to go, but considering that it's awfully chilly, and that Hawkstar arose the tension between us, WindClan, and RiverClan, we might go home early."

She sighed. She'd wanted to talk to Breezepaw and Swiftpaw a bit more. *But I suppose there will be other gatherings in the future.*

True to Ravenfoot's word, Crowstar called RiverClan away. Yet thankfully the other leaders did not follow suit.

"Hello again." Breezepaw had come up from behind her. "Let's go find Swiftpaw."

Together they squeezed their way over to the WindClan cats. Swiftpaw was sitting near a light gray she-cat with blue eyes. Brookpaw assumed she must be his mentor.

"That's Skyfall," Breezepaw meowed under her breath, "some cats claim she'll become the WindClan leader someday."

"She'll have to live through Smokestar's remaining lives and possibly Cherrybreeze's though."

"True. But who knows what'll happen?"

Finally Swiftpaw spotted them and slunk away from Skyfall. He barely made a sound as he approached them, and she was reminded of Ravenfoot.

"Hi. Again," Brookpaw meowed.

The black apprentice didn't answer at first.

"Hey, are you okay? Breezepaw asked, her tail twitching.

Swiftpaw sighed. "I'm just *really* angry with RiverClan. Fuzztail was my father Heronpelt's brother. He was like another father to me. And now I hear that Mistfur was killed. What's their problem?"

"Maybe they're trying to convince the other clans that they're strong, when in fact they aren't," Brookpaw meowed solemnly.

Breezepaw snorted. "Well you two are cheery today, aren't you?"

Swiftpaw looked like he was going to reply when a white-she cat with brown feet passed by. Her eyes were a purple-blue color, and she nodded to Swiftpaw as she padded past them. The apprentice melted in the most inconspicuous way possible. But Breezepaw was on to him in a flash.

"Oh, that's Egretflight, isn't it Swiftpaw. Wow, she's *really* pretty. No wonder you-"

Both Brookpaw and her WindClan friend swiped at Breezepaw, who was cut off as she ducked and gave a small hiss.

"Touch-y," she meowed.

Swiftpaw leaned towards Brookpaw. "Remind me to be annoying to her when she finds a cat who catches her eye."

"No problem," she replied.

Chapter Ten

[image]

Two sunrises had passed since the gathering.

Emberheart was organizing patrols for the day.

"Sageclaw, you're going to take Minkpelt, Leafpaw, and Rabbitflight on a hunting patrol."

Brookpaw swore she saw Sageclaw roll her eyes at the mention of Rabbitflight, but she couldn't be sure. She watched as the mentioned cats slowly got up to leave the camp. The days were constantly chilly now, yet there still was no snow, leaving most of the cats in bad moods.

"It always bugs me when we get a late leaf-bare," Duskpelt rasped, "Makes me think it'll be bad when it does come."

Fantastic. Although Brookpaw was looking forward to seeing snow properly, she didn't want to have a bad leaf-bare. Duskpelt continued to talk as she replaced the old she-cat's nest with some new bedding.

"Now that's going to be a bit cold as first, but you'll just have to warm it up," Brookpaw told her. "If you really want me to, I'll do it, but I don't want Ravenfoot to think I'm dozing off and not doing my job."

Duskpelt chuckled. "That's alright Brookpaw, I'll just make Dustscar sit on it. Go on, make yourself useful somewhere else."

Brookpaw put her tail on the she-cat's flank before stepping out of the den. Duskpelt had taken Mistfur's death hard, and it was good to see her cheering up. She'd refused to eat the past two days, and had chose to mumble on about how leaf-bare was terrible and cruel. Earlier Brookpaw had brought her a mouse, which Duskpelt had nibbled on, which was the first sign that her grief was ebbing a

little.

Emberheart had just about finished organizing the patrols when Hawkstar intervened.

"If you don't mind, I'll lead a patrol near the river to check and see if Crowstar is upholding his promise."

Emberheart gave him a look. "Are you sure?"

"Would he be telling you if he wasn't sure?"

Applefall had joined the conversation. Honestly, Brookpaw was surprised. She'd never had a problem with Emberheart, and wondered why her mother seemed to dislike her so much sometimes. *Maybe if she told me about her past, I'd know*. But that wasn't going to happen.

Hawkstar picked up the tension between the two she-cats and meowed firmly, "I have thought this through. We can't just avoid the RiverClan border, or we *are* what Coyotefoot accused us of being, too weak to defend our borders. The patrol sizes will be larger now, since we've let off some on battle training."

The dark tabby and golden she-cat nodded, understanding.

"I will be taking Mapleclaw, Berrypaw, Ravenfoot, and Brookpaw with me."

Brookpaw caught her mother's eye, then looked away as she padded up to Hawkstar. Ravenfoot fell in beside her, and Mapleclaw and Berrypaw dashed across the clearing towards them.

"Let's go," Hawkstar murmured.

The patrol set off towards the gorse tunnel.

"Maybe we'll get to teach those mouse-brained cats a proper lesson," Berrypaw hissed under her breath. Only Brookpaw heard her.

In truth, she wouldn't have minded swiping at Willowlight a few

times, but starting a fight with the already angry RiverClan cats didn't seem like a good idea. *Ouch*! Her tail had caught in the brambles. Thankfully she'd been the last one to enter the tunnel. She managed to turn around and pluck her tail out with her teeth. *This hasn't happened before. I must be growing or something.*

Brookpaw bounded out of the tunnel, eager to catch up with the rest of the patrol. They weren't very far ahead, but Ravenfoot gave a knowing glance in her direction. Sighing, she fell in place beside him as the cats wove through the undergrowth towards the river. Since the leaves had fallen off during the previous moon, it was very easy to see the sky now. Not that it was much to look at. It had been cloudy for ages, yet still no snow had fallen.

One by one the cats jumped across the stream, not speaking a word. Even Berrypaw, who for once didn't seem to have a snotty remark to make. *Are they all thinking about RiverClan? Surely they aren't all nervous*. She could smell no fear-scent on them, yet her clanmates were somber. *You all seemed fine when we were still at camp.*

Hesitation kept her from saying anything about it, so Brookpaw followed along, joining their emotionless journey. *Are all of Hawkstar's patrols like this*?

Just then an all too familiar scent washed over her. *No, they can't have! Those lying-*

A group of six RiverClan cats leapt out of the brush at the passing patrol. A number of thoughts ran through Brookpaw's head as it happened. Included were, *the breeze must have been blowing away from us; fox dung, is that Willowlight? And of course, how in StarClan are these chubby fish-eaters fighting so well in the brush*!?

Willowlight was indeed one of the cats, and apparently the one in charge. Carpfur, Coyotefoot, and Iceheart were with her, along with two other cats Brookpaw didn't or barely recognized. One was a small tabby and white she-cat, and the other was a dark gray tom with strange silvery eyes.

Willowlight had gone straight for Hawkstar, and was taking

advantage of his blind eye. The ThunderClan leader had fast reflexes despite his handicap, but the black she-cat was faster. Mapleclaw was grappling with Iceheart, while Berrypaw battled Carpfur. Ravenfoot was battling both Coyotefoot and the tabby and white she-cat, darting back and forth between his two opponents tirelessly. She herself was left with the gray tom.

To her own surprise, the tom, did not attack straight away. His silvery eyes focused on her. "Aren't you getting tired of all this?" His voice was velvety and soft, yet menacing at the same time. In truth, she felt a bit transfixed by it, but her tongue had a mind of it's own.

"Aren't *you*?"

The tom smirked a little. His silver eyes gleamed, and Brookpaw lept out of the way before he pounced, much quicker than Ravenfoot would have (which was saying something).

I guess I'll add that to my list; stalling your opponent.

She let out a small shriek as the gray cat pushed her down on her side, just like she'd done to Willowlight.

"I was hoping when Willowlight told me that you were somewhat good at fighting that this wouldn't be so easy," he hissed softly, "but apparently she's let me down again."

Brookpaw did something she'd never tried before. She kicked her hind legs back into the tom's, causing him to stumble for half a second. That was all she needed. As his grip loosened, she managed to roll away and leap to her feet.

The tom did not lunge after her. Instead he smirked at her, distracting her momentarily as Willowlight crashed into her, claws extended and fangs gleaming.

"Slywhisker, deal with Hawkstar!" She hissed as Brookpaw was pushed onto the ground yet again. Willowlight's green eyes glanced down at her, blazing with hatred and happiness at the same time.

"You can't fight us forever, *Brookpaw*. We *will* win back Sunningrocks."

The silver tabby put her ears back. "This isn't about that. Don't lie to me, *fleabag*."

Willowlight hissed and clawed her along the back. It took all of Brookpaw's effort not to screech.

"Why would Crowstar do this?" She meowed softly, glaring at the black she-cat.

"You think my fool of a brother planned this? Since the last border fight he's gotten soft, and I blame you for that. How dare you, a little apprentice, make a clan leader swear on his own life?!"

Brookpaw did not reply. Instead she let herself become angry, much angrier than she'd ever become before. She'd done what was necessary for the good of her clan. She hadn't murdered Crowstar.

Though I feel like I could murder Willowlight.

Letting out a screech, Brookpaw summoned the last of her strength, and, fueled by her anger, jerked up, sending Willowlight backwards. She did not wait for her to recover. Instead she clawed at the she-cat so hard she thought her claws would rip out. Willowlight tried to get up, but Brookpaw pushed her down again, not relenting until she'd vented the rest of her anger.

By that time, Willowlight was in pretty bad shape. The silver tabby had clawed deep gouges into her flank, from which blood was running like a river. Normally would have felt guilty for hurting a cat so badly, but not today. *She would have brought this upon herself sooner or later.*

Being so focused on fighting Willowlight, Brookpaw hadn't even paid attention to the other cats. Hawkstar had Slywhisker pinned. Berrypaw was standing near an exhausted Carpfur, who seemed to have no energy left to attack her. Ravenfoot had managed to chase away the tabby and white she-cat, but was still grappling with Coyotefoot. Mapleclaw and Iceheart were nowhere to be seen.

"Hawkstar?" Brookpaw meowed.

Her leader looked up, his gold-green eye widening as he saw

Willowlight collapsed on the forest floor, covered in her own blood. Brookpaw's silver tabby pelt was thick with the red liquid as well, but it was not just her opponent's blood.

"We need to get her to a medicine cat," she continued.

Hawkstar's expression was filled with questions, but he nodded to her and ordered Berrypaw to fetch help. The red tabby shot her an unreadable look before bounding off into the undergrowth.

Surely she isn't jealous this time?

"Alright, alright, we get it," Slywhisker meowed. "Coyotefoot, stop. Find Iceheart and bring him back here."

Hawkstar growled threateningly at the gray tom. "Don't you dare give orders on ThunderClan territory. Now tell me, since Willowlight is in no condition to do so, why have you returned? Crowstar didn't put you up to this, did he?"

Slywhisker rolled his eyes. Beside her, Willowlight moaned, as if trying to answer. But words came only from Slywhisker.

"Clearly you did not hear her when she told Brookpaw," he meowed, smirking. *How can he be so relaxed*? Not many would dare be sarcastic when Hawkstar was threatening them.

"Clearly I did not."

By this point, Ravenfoot and Coyotefoot had stopped fighting. Mapleclaw and Iceheart were still nowhere to be seen. All eyes were on the ThunderClan leader and the silver-tongued warrior.

Slywhisker turned his head towards Brookpaw. "Brookpaw, why don't you explain it to your leader, whose hearing seems as bad as his eyesight."

Hawkstar pinned his ears back, but other than that, he did not react to the comment.

Brookpaw took a breath. "Willowlight lead them here. Crowstar had nothing to do with it, according to her. Yet she said this is still

all about Sunningrocks, which, in my opinion, in complete *mouse dung*, because it's nearly winter, so why fight for some rocks that won't even be good for anything until new-leaf?"

Slywhisker smirked again. "Excellent, Brookpaw. There is hope for you after all."

"Leave my cats alo-"

Hawkstar would've said *alone*, but suddenly Iceheart sprang from the brush, crashing straight into the ThunderClan leader. The cats barely had any time to react. Brookpaw leapt at Slywhisker, who had rolled away as Hawkstar had released him. Ravenfoot tried to attack Iceheart, but it was too late. The white tom had whacked Hawkstar's head against a large stone as the two cats fell. Blood was pooling from Hawkstar's nose and mouth. He did not stir. Iceheart was about to attack again when Ravenfoot clawed him, hissing with anger.

Brookpaw didn't have time to think about what had happened to Hawkstar. She was busy enough fighting Slywhisker, for the second time in this battle. And what made it worse is that no matter how hard she hit or clawed him, the gray tom just kept smirking at her, like she'd told him a good joke. It infuriated her, which was probably why he was doing it.

"You and Willowlight," she hissed as she dodged a blow from his wickedly sharp claws, "Are scheming, ruthless, vile-"

"You flatter me, apprentice," Slywhisker meowed softly before taking another swipe at her.

Brookpaw opened her jaws to retort something back, but somehow he had twisted her tongue, and she couldn't think hard enough to form words. She closed her jaw and looked straight at him, slightly reproachful. She and the agile gray tom continued to fight, neither one of them really winning. Eventually she would run out of energy, and she guessed that was what Slywhisker was waiting for.

"I thought you guys had stopped fight-" Berrypaw yowled as she

returned with Aspenglow, Applefall, Rabbitflight, and Stormclaw. For the first time, the red tabby seemed speechless as she spotted Hawkstar's unmoving body.

Aspenglow, however, took immediate action. She scrambled over to Hawkstar, inspecting his wounds.

"We'll have to use some of the cobwebs to stop the bleeding," she meowed to Applefall, who looked grim. "There's nothing else I can do at the moment, as he's losing a life."

Applefall peeled off a few of the cobwebs she'd stuck to her fur and passed it to the medicine cat.

Upon the other cats arrival, Slywhisker had stopped fighting. Ravenfoot and Iceheart stood still, too. Berrypaw strode up to Brookpaw, like she meant business.

"We've got to go find Mapleclaw," she meowed curtly.

Brookpaw nodded, stopped licking the blood out of her fur, and took off with the red tabby, searching the nearby undergrowth. *Please tell me Iceheart didn't kill him and leave him out here*. Berrypaw seemed to be thinking the same thing. It was touching, in a way, to see her actually concerned about someone other than herself.

They found traces of both Mapleclaw's and Iceheart's scent, but it was hard to follow either one because they were so intermixed.

"I think we should split up," Berrypaw meowed, "we might find him faster."

"Although I know you'd love to get rid of me, it'd probably best to stay together. Willowlight might have had more cats with her, and positioned them to ambush unsuspecting cats. That's how Hawkstar got taken down."

An eerie silence settled between the two apprentices. They'd almost completely circled the site of the battle when they found Mapleclaw stashed under a bramble bush. His golden tabby pelt was slick with blood, but he appeared to be breathing.

"I'll push, you pull," Berrypaw ordered before scrambling under the barren bush. The red tabby managed to push Mapleclaw out far enough for Brookpaw to grab his scruff and pull him the rest of the way out. Although he was breathing, the tom was out cold.

"We need to bring him back to Aspenglow," Brookpaw meowed, "Obviously."

Berrypaw nodded. "Let's try to carry him on our backs. Only if you're strong enough, though, Brookpaw."

The silver tabby rolled her eyes and grabbed Mapleclaw's scruff again, hoisting him first onto Berrypaw's back, and then allowing his back end to be stretched across her by the red tabby.

I really am getting tired of carrying around limp, motionless cats.

Aspenglow had had her paws full for most of the day. The light tabby had wanted to bring the injured cats back to camp, but she was scared of injuring some, like Willowlight, even more by doing so. It didn't help having the RiverClan cats staring at her the whole time as she inspected their clanmate. *You could at least offer to help*, she thought grumpily. But even if they had asked, there was nothing they could really do anyway. The only one that seemed to truly realize this, however, was the gray tom, Slywhisker.

He does look a little like Silvershine, she thought, *perhaps he's her brother. If so, he's probably picked up something from her*.

Hawkstar had started to move again. There was nothing she could have done to prevent him from losing a life, but she *could* help him recover from it.

"Applefall, can you chew up the burdock?" She murmured. "Willowlight and Mapleclaw are going to need it to prevent their wounds from being infected."

The golden brown she-cat nodded. "But what about Brookpaw?"

Can't you just do what I ask before you ask me something? Aspenglow thought. But she immediately scolded herself for thinking it. *It's only natural for her to be worried about Brookpaw.*

She's her mother, after all.

"Brookpaw's scratches will be fine for a little while longer. When we've got these three cats sorted, we'll tend to her and Ravenfoot."

Applefall nodded and began chewing up the leaves.

At the moment, Aspenglow had Berrypaw and Brookpaw fetching more herbs from the camp. Stormclaw and Rabbitflight were keeping watch on Iceheart, Carpfur, Coyotefoot, and Slywhisker. Ravenfoot had been sent back to camp to report the incident to Emberheart.

Come on, hurry up, she pleaded, referring to the two apprentices. *We really need the comfrey for Hawkstar*.

When Berrypaw had originally come for help, they'd only known that Willowlight and possibly Brookpaw had some nasty cuts. But when they had arrived on the scene, Hawkstar had cracked his head against a rock, too. Aspenglow and Applefall hadn't brought the herbs for that, which was why they sent Brookpaw and Berrypaw back to camp.

"Ugh," Hawkstar moaned quietly, "*That* was unpleasant."

The ThunderClan leader tried to stand up, but Aspenglow had pushed him back down before he could even get his feet under him.

"You just lost a life. You're not going anywhere," she meowed sternly.

Iceheart snickered.

"Be quiet, you," Applefall snarled. She'd begun rubbing the poultice into Willowlight's wounds. But the black she-cat didn't even moan.

She's not going to make it much longer, Aspenglow realized. Brookpaw had clawed her pretty badly, and she'd lost a ton of blood. She met Slywhisker's silver gaze. *Do you want to take her back to camp before she goes*?

The tom shook his head.

Fine. Then let's not waste all our supplies on her.

"Applefall, put some cobwebs on her wounds then move on to Mapleclaw," she meowed. "Now Hawkstar, we're still waiting on the comfrey for you. I don't think your skull is cracked, but it's going to feel like you have a massive headache for a few days. The comfrey ought to take care of the wound. I can give you other herbs to dull the pain."

Hawkstar nodded, still dazed.

Come on! Hurry up you two!

Brookpaw and Berrypaw burst out from the brush, each carrying a few carefully wrapped bundle of herbs. Berrypaw dropped the ones containing comfrey at Aspenglow's feet, while Brookpaw set down the burdock refills for Applefall.

"You can start to chew that up," Applefall meowed to her daughter, gesturing at the burdock. Brookpaw nodded and pulled open the leaf, her nose twitching at the sharp scent of the herb. But the silver tabby made no complaint and began to chew up the leaves.

"Berrypaw, you can help Stormclaw and Rabbitflight to make sure they don't attack us," Aspenglow meowed, pointing her tail at the RiverClan cats.

Berrypaw held her head up high and walked proudly over to the big tabby and white tom.

Ah, there's one thing herbs can't cure; smugness.

Burdock tasted awful. It was sharp and tangy, and made Brookpaw want to throw up. But she knew it would help the wounded cats, so she kept chewing, her respect for Aspenglow growing by the mouthful. Once she'd finished with a batch, Applefall would take it and spread it on Mapleclaw's wounds.

She was aware of Slywhisker watching her, his silvery eyes giving nothing away. It was creepy for sure, but it was hard not to look back. Those eyes were just so odd...in a good- no, in a bad way, she supposed. So Brookpaw did her best to ignore him, staring down at the ground as she chewed the burdock leaves.

"That's enough, thank you," Applefall told her softly. The golden brown she-cat began spreading cobwebs over Mapleclaw's wounds.

Brookpaw watched her, fascinated. She wondered when her mother had learned how to do all of this. Of course, Applefall probably wouldn't tell her. Once again the irritation returned, making her blue eyes narrow as she watched her mother.

What in your past makes it so bad that you won't tell me about anything? She thought. *My father? Any possible siblings of yours? The battle of the wolves?*

If she'd noticed Brookpaw glaring at her, Applefall didn't show it.

Chapter Eleven

[image] [image]

Another hour passed before Aspenglow allowed Hawkstar to stand up, and within that hour Willowlight had died. None of the ThunderClan cats were particularly grieved, but the odd thing was that none of the RiverClan cats appeared to be either. Surprisingly, Slywhisker seemed to be the most affected. He'd let out a sigh and something that sounded like *shame*.

"We need to take her back to your camp," Hawkstar meowed.

Both the RiverClan cats and Aspenglow shot him looks.

"*You* just lost a life! You could make your injuries worse, Hawkstar, don't be stupid!"

Iceheart stepped forward. "And why do you have to come with us? We know where our camp is, thank you very much."

Hawkstar looked at the white tom, his gold-green eye blazing. "Because I'd like to explain what happened to Crowstar."

"And why would he even believe you?"

"Well," Hawkstar laughed, "my injury just might help to convince him."

Iceheart couldn't seem to find a comeback for that. He cursed under his breath and gave Carpfur an *oh, great* look.

"Aspenglow, I want you to stay here and look after Mapleclaw. You said his wounds aren't as bad as you originally thought, yes?"

The light tabby nodded. Brookpaw could tell she was still frustrated with the ThunderClan leader.

"Stormclaw, help her get Mapleclaw back to camp. Applefall, Rabbitflight, Berrypaw, Brookpaw and I will escort Willowlight's

body and her clanmates home. I don't know how long we'll be. Crowstar and I will need a bit of time to discuss all that's happened. Emberheart is officially in charge of ThunderClan again, until I return." Hawkstar glanced around, making eye contact with all of the cats. "Is that clear?"

Aspenglow and Stormclaw nodded, and Iceheart sighed.

"Then let's get moving. I want to get there before night fall."

Coyotefoot and Carpfur carried Willowlight's body across their backs. They worked together as a team, completely in sync with each other. Brookpaw thought it was quite impressive. She and Berrypaw had carried Mapleclaw the same way, but they'd had to think about almost every move that they made. The fact that they didn't get along well hadn't helped either.

The last cat in the world that Brookpaw wanted to talk to was Slywhisker, but he was closest RiverClan cat to her, and she wanted to know about Carpfur and Coyotefoot.

"Are they brother and sister or something?" She asked under her breath, gesturing to the two cats.

Slywhisker shook his head. "No. But good friends? Yes."

Rabbitflight shot Brookpaw a look. *What are you doing? He's an enemy cat.*

She returned his gaze. *It's not like I'm asking him to share a mouse with me, calm your fur.*

Why had Hawkstar brought Rabbitflight along? He hardly seemed to be the cat to deliver a dead body. *But maybe that's why he brought him. He hardly* seems *like a threat.* Anyway, she was grateful that Applefall was with them. Brookpaw had hardly ever been out with her mother, and it was nice to see her at her best; out on a mission, side by side with Hawkstar.

She let out a long yawn. It wasn't even evening yet, but it had been a very long day for her. *I certainly can't afford to be sleepy when I cross the river.* They wouldn't have to swim, as there were stepping

stones farther upstream, but the idea of slipping off a rock into an icy river did not sound appealing.

The sky was cloudy, once again threatening to snow. The air was sharp and cool. Slowly it's refreshing scent woke her up. Finally, at long last, the first flake of snow fell. Brookpaw watched it drift downwards helplessly into the river. Slowly but surely, more and more flakes fell. One landed on her nose, and she smiled as it melted.

Willowlight's limp body was now spotted with white. Brookpaw couldn't help but to think the snowflakes had more life in them than the black she-cat.

"There they are," Slywhisker breathed.

Brookpaw looked up, spotting the stepping stones up ahead. She wondered if Coyotefoot and Carpfur could keep their coordination crossing them.

"I'll go across first," Iceheart meowed, looking around to see if any of the other cats objected.

None did.

"Then I'll go across second," said Hawkstar. "Carpfur and Coyotefoot can follow me. Then I assume Slywhisker will want to cross, and the rest of you can follow him."

Iceheart leaped across the stones. When he made it to the other side he turned around, pinning his ears back. "Remember Hawkstar, this is RiverClan territory now. We'll be giving the orders from here." The ThunderClan leader said nothing, but his expression made up for that. Iceheart sighed and rolled his eyes. "Oh, let me guess, you consider us prisoners of battle?"

Brookpaw winced. If she knew Hawkstar, he would tell the silvery-white tom *exactly* what he considered them to be.

"No, not at all. I consider you disloyal, cruel cats who apparently can't take the truth," Hawkstar meowed evenly. He leaped gracefully across the rocks, not even acknowledging the now

bristling Iceheart.

Carpfur and Coyotefoot gave each other looks before jumping across to the first stone. Brookpaw was extremely impressed. Not only had they been able to move at exactly the same time, but they'd also managed to keep Willowlight's body balanced on top of them. They leaped again, and still had no problems.

Brookpaw held her breath until they reached the other side.

Slywhisker padded forwards next, leaping across the rocks as if he did it everyday. *Well, he might've, considering he was part of Willowlight's little rebel group*.

Rabbitflight went after him, and was much less graceful. He seemed nervous the whole time, and nearly fell in as he rushed to get to land again. Brookpaw thought she saw Slywhisker roll his eyes as her friend landed poorly on the shore.

Only she, Berrypaw, and Applefall were left.

"You two go," her mother meowed, "I'll be close behind."

Berrypaw gave her a look that clearly meant *go right on ahead, mousebrain.*

Brookpaw held her tongue. She wanted to say, "I thought scaredy cats were supposed to go first." But she simply rolled her eyes and checked out the first stone.

It was only about a tail-length jump to it. That was easy. Brookpaw barely had to spring to get to it. But the next one was about three tail-lengths away, and the mass of rushing cold water did nothing to encourage her.

Berrypaw's smirking, however, did.

Almost without thinking about it, Brookpaw leaped. Her claws came into contact with cold stone. Amazingly, she did not slip off, and managed to clamber on top of it. The next stone was only about two tail-lengths away, and before she knew it, the silver tabby had crossed the river.

She turned back to watch Berrypaw, who leaped easily to the first rock, just as she had. However, on her second jump, the red tabby misjudged the distance slightly, and nearly went right over the second stepping stone. To give her some credit, she did not become flustered. In fact, Berrypaw leaped quite gracefully to the third, fourth, and fifth rock.

The red tabby gave her a smug glance and sat down next to Hawkstar.

Applefall had no problem crossing. In fact, she seemed quite at home, leaping across the stones like a mountain cat.

"Please follow us," Carpfur meowed. It was almost comical, because she and Coyotefoot still had Willowlight draped across their backs. Or at least, if might've been funny if Willowlight wasn't dead.

The RiverClan cats lead them back downriver, winding in and out of frozen reeds and small trees. The snow continued falling, at first speckling the ground like a fawn's hide, then beginning to cover it completely. Brookpaw wondered if it would trigger any of her early memories as a kit, when she'd nearly died of starvation. But her mind only continued to go through her normal thoughts, and she let out a small sigh of disgust.

"Ugh, it's freezing out here," Rabbitflight hissed.

Brookpaw rolled her eyes. "It's not that bad."

"You have longer fur than me!"

"Only slightly," she hissed under her breath, "Stop complaining! Do you want all these cats to think you're an idiot!"

"Dear, we already *know* he's an idiot," Slywhisker meowed quietly to them.

Rabbitflight looked enraged. His ears went back. His pupils narrowed. He looked like he was preparing to lunge himself at the gray tom when Hawkstar laid his tail on the young tom's shoulder.

"He's only trying to annoy you, Rabbitflight, it would be better to

ignore him."

The orange and white tom looked like he might argue with Hawkstar, but slowly he calmed down, simply putting all of his anger into giving Slywhisker an evil glare.

Not for the first time this day, Brookpaw rolled her eyes. *Toms.*

It didn't take them to look to get to the RiverClan camp. The first thing Brookpaw noticed was that a small tributary from the river wrapped around it, giving it a natural defense. Across it, more frozen reeds wrapped around the island. Ice-covered willow trees dotted multiple sections of it.

"It's beautiful," she meowed, then cringed, as she realized she'd spoken out loud.

To her surprise, Applefall nodded. "I came here once when it was green-leaf, when I was an apprentice. If I liked water half as much as you RiverClan cats, I'd want to live here."

Did my mother just talk about something from her past?

"Well, now that we've had our heart-to-heart talk, let's get into the camp," Iceheart growled.

Slywhisker stepped forward. "I'll go in first. Tell everyone that you're coming so they don't attack you." He gestured towards the ThunderClan cats.

"I appreciate your offer," Hawkstar meowed, "but I'd rather go with you, then return for my clanmates."

That makes sense. If Slywhisker goes in alone, he could convince his clanmates that we are here as enemies.

Slywhisker nodded slowly, then smiled. "I hope you're good at leaping. If not..." He tilted his head. "I guess we'll see how long it takes for the coldsleep to kick in."

Brookpaw eyed the icy stream. Leaping across it would be about six or seven tail lengths. Not too bad for an experienced cat. But for

two apprentices...

Hawkstar backed up a few steps, then ran forward, leaped, and cleared the stream. She glanced back to Slywhisker. His expression was, naturally, unreadable.

"Don't you have a log or something for your kits to cross?" Rabbitflight asked sincerely. "I know kits are supposed to stay in the camp, but occasionally accidents happen." He gave Brookpaw a meaningful glance.

"Shut up," she hissed.

Slywhisker rolled his eyes and launched himself over the stream. "Iceheart, why don't you answer ThunderClan's idiot?!" He called back over, then disappeared into the reeds with Hawkstar.

Rabbitflight was bristling again. "I swear, if I get the chance again, I'm going to strangle him."

"Do you want your answer or not?" Iceheart growled.

Rabbitflight didn't answer. Instead, Brookpaw spoke up.

"Let me guess. If the kits are in the reed beds, they're fine. If they go much farther out, they get washed downstream and either learn to swim or drown. The latter option probably keeps them out of the deep water, for the most part. Am I right?"

Iceheart nodded.

"Oh, I've got a question," Berrypaw chided in. "And I dare say it's a bit more practical than Rabbitflight's. How in StarClan's name are you going to get her across there?" She gestured with her tail at Willowlight's body, which Carpfur and Coyotefoot had set down.

Coyotefoot began to dig under the shallow layer of snow. After a few seconds, he pulled out a large strip of bark that was large enough to hold a cat.

"With this," he meowed dryly.

By the time Slywhisker and Hawkstar returned, they'd dragged Willowlight's body onto the slab of bark. Some of the snowflakes on her pelt had fallen off or melted as they had done so, but the snow kept falling, gently recovering the dead she-cat's body.

Hawkstar gestured with his tail for them to cross.

Carpfur and Coyotefoot pushed the bark onto the water. Surprisingly, it stayed afloat. Coyotefoot gestured to Slywhisker, who nodded. Then the two cats pushed the slab across the slow-moving stream.

Slywhisker grabbed ahold of it a little farther downstream. Hawkstar helped him pull it out of the water.

Iceheart turned towards Applefall and the two apprentices. "Good luck getting across," he snickered, then leapt over the stream.

Applefall rolled her eyes and leaped, clearing the body of water easily. Rabbitflight followed, only messing up his landing a little when he nearly impaled himself with a frozen reed. Then it was Berrypaw's turn.

This time, the red tabby did not make Brookpaw go first. She simply backed up a good ways, took a deep breath, and ran full speed towards the stream, using her momentum as her advantage. She soared through the air, nearly crashing into Iceheart, who growled at her. Berrypaw didn't seem to care though. A smirk crossed her face, and then she sat back to watch Brookpaw.

All these cats are waiting on me, she thought. Honestly, she didn't like the feeling at all. It wasn't as if they were waiting for her command. *I'd better do this quickly.*

She backed up like Berrypaw, but not as far. She had enough strength in her back legs now to leap pretty far, but would it be enough? There was only one way to find out. Brookpaw darted forward and pushed off, gliding through the air. She even managed to land half decent, about a tail-length away from the shore.

As soon as she landed, the rest of the cats began to weave through the thick patch of reeds that circled around the island. Brookpaw followed Applefall, trying to step exactly where her mother had, to make it look like only one cat had crossed through here. *It might be a good tactic to confuse an enemy. Perhaps I'll bring it up when I see Ravenfoot again.*

Before she knew it, they were out of the reeds, looking at a clearing. Dens lined the outer edges as well as more barren willow trees. The dens were made of woven—you guessed it—reeds. Feathers and shells lined the den walls, adding a little bit of decor to the otherwise plain dens.

"Ah, there you are," came a familiar voice.

"Hello, Crowstar," Applefall meowed, her voice curt and even. Brookpaw tried to retract her claws, but found that she just couldn't. The last time she'd met Crowstar, he'd been an absolute jerk, and she didn't expect that to change.

However, he seemed a little different with Hawkstar and Applefall around. He stood straighter, and seemed completely at ease, like he was hanging out with old friends. He only dropped the look when he saw Willowlight's body.

"What happened?" He asked, and to the ThunderClan cats surprise, didn't sound too shocked.

Hawkstar answered him. "She lead a group of cats to attack us on our territory. She claimed that she was trying to reclaim Sunningrocks, but we suspect it's because I spoke against you at the last gathering. We've accompanied her back here out of respect-" Hawkstar gave Crowstar a look that probably meant *unlike you, when Mistfur was killed*, "-and to find out if you or Willowlight planned this attack."

Crowstar sat down, thinking for a moment. "Willowlight did not care for me, despite whatever she may have said about you insulting me. She thought I was stupid, too slow when making a decision. So one day I gave in. I became vicious. I made quick decisions. I let her influence my actions. I thought, *maybe this will*

make my clan happy. Maybe she's right. But she wasn't." The black tom sighed. "I realized this after Mistfur's death. So I went back to my old ways, and Willowlight got angry. She must have taken matters into her own paws. I gave her permission today to lead a patrol. She must have chosen all her friends and lead them to attack you."

No cats, ThunderClan or RiverClan, spoke. All eyes were on Crowstar.

"I apologize deeply for this," Crowstar meowed. "What have my sister's actions cost you?"

Hawkstar tilted his head. "Well, let me see. One of my lives, and a fairly severely hurt warrior."

Crowstar's eyes widened. "One of your lives?!" He cursed and shook his head. "We need to talk about this somewhere else, in private. Your warriors and apprentices are welcome to stay here while we discuss this."

Does that mean we're staying the night here? The sky was already darkening. It wouldn't be much longer till night.

Hawkstar nodded, and he and Crowstar set off for one of the dens. Applefall, Rabbitflight, Berrypaw, and Brookpaw were left to stand awkwardly in front of the remaining RiverClan cats.

(Coldsleep = hypothermia)

Chapter Twelve

[image]

Thankfully, the silence between the cats was broken quickly by a silvery gray she-cat.

"I suppose you'll need somewhere to stay then?" She asked kindly, her icy blue eyes sparkling. It took Brookpaw a moment, but she eventually realized her eyes were awfully similar to Slywhisker's. *Maybe she's his sister.*

"Only if you have room," Applefall replied.

The silver she-cat swished her tail as if to say *don't worry about it.* "Of course we have room, and we can't have you staying out in the snow. Follow me."

She lead them to a den a little farther away from the others. It looked a little beat up, to be honest, but it would do, Brookpaw supposed.

"This is one of dens we recovered from the last flood," the she-cat meowed. "We'll bring you something to make a few nests with, but to be honest, we are a bit short on supplies at the moment."

"Aspenglow might be able to spare a few things," said Applefall, "we collected a lot during this green-leaf."

So she's the medicine cat? Silvershine? And Applefall is offering her herbs just after our leader lost one of his lives due to this clan?

Silvershine smiled grimly. "So did we. But we've had so many border fights lately, I've used up a lot of my supply. And it looks as if Aspenglow already wasted some of her herbs on us." She gestured back at Willowlight's body. "I smelled burdock on her. It would be rude to ask for more."

"Maybe," Brookpaw meowed, "But it might save the lives of some

of your clanmates."

Silvershine's icy blue eyes fell on her. "Perhaps..." she trailed off. "I'll tell Larchpaw to see to your bedding. I would tell you to make yourselves comfortable, but that hardly seems to be the right thing to say when you're staying in an enemy clan's camp after we've apparently attacked you." She sighed. "Sometimes I could just *claw* my brother."

Silvershine seemed to realize she'd spoken that last thought aloud. "Nevermind, nevermind. I hope my clanmates have the sense to treat you well." The silver-gray cat dashed off, once again leaving the Thunderclan cats alone.

Rabbitflight swished his tail. "I don't like this. Why do we have to stay so long?"

"Because Hawkstar has to chew Crowstar out some more," Berrypaw hissed. "How stupid are you?"

"Be quiet, you two," Applefall meowed. "This is no time to get in a quarrel."

Both Rabbitflight and Berrypaw shot her looks, but said nothing. Brookpaw sighed. *This is going to be a long night.*

Despite Silvershine's warning that the RiverClan cats may be hostile, Brookpaw strode back into the main clearing. To her surprise, very few of the cats seemed to notice her. *Surely I just don't blend in*? She thought. Looking around, she inspected the cats.

A small group surrounded Willowlight's body. None seemed very keen to hold vigil for her. *I suppose burying her will be a bit hard, considering that the ground's nearly frozen now*. Near what she assumed was the nursery, a young brown apprentice was playing with three kits. Crowstar's kits.

"Who's that?" A silver and white tom mewed, looking up at the apprentice.

"One of the ThunderClan cats who is staying with us for a little bit," the apprentice meowed softly.

The other two, a gray tabby tom and a white she-kit, sat up to look at Brookpaw.

"Hi!" The she-kit meowed excitedly.

Brookpaw looked at the apprentice. *Do you mind?*

The brown she-cat shook her head.

"Hello," Brookpaw told the kits, "Having fun in the snow?"

"Yeah!" The siblings squealed in unison. To prove their point, the white kit jumped in a small snow pile, practically disappearing.

The silver and white tom jumped in after her, leaving only the gray tabby behind.

"Let me guess," Brookpaw meowed, "you're Pigeonkit, your brother over there is Cloverkit, and your sister is Swankit."

The gray tabby looked shocked. "How did you know?"

She smiled. "Crowstar announced your names at the gathering, and I put two and two together."

Swankit and Cloverkit had started to fight. The effect was more humorous than dramatic, as both kits kept tripping and falling face first into the accumulating snow, squealing joyously as they did so.

"Kits! Time to come in—" A tabby and white queen began to call, but cut off as she saw Brookpaw.

"It's alright, Greenwillow. She's part of the group that's staying here tonight," the brown she-cat meowed.

The queen gave Brookpaw another sharp look. "Are you sure, Violetpaw?"

"Absolutely positive."

Brookpaw appreciated the brown she-cat's support, but did Greenwillow really think that her clanmates would really just let

random cats into their camp?

Greenwillow gave her another suspicious look and tried to gather her kits into the nursery.

"Mom! Why do we have to go in?!" Cloverkit protested.

"Yeah," Swankit agreed, "The snow is fun!"

Their mother sighed and said more sharply, "Kits. Inside. *Now*."

No more protests were made.

"She's just a bit overprotective," Violetpaw meowed when the queen had settled back inside the nursery.

"I understand why she would suspect me, for being ThunderClan, but why would she think—"

"That random cats would be prowling around the camp?" Violetpaw let out a soft laugh, but it was not a happy one. "She has her reasons."

Brookpaw nodded. She wished she had the kits' energy, as she was dead tired after the fight and hike over here.

"Thanks for not clawing my ears off," she told Violetpaw, "I appreciate it. But I've got to get some sleep or I'm going to fall into the river tomorrow when we go home."

The brown she-cat smiled. "No problem. But if you're ever looking for a cat who *will* claw your ears off, ask for Irispaw. She's my sister."

"I've got enough cats who want to claw my ears off, but thanks." Brookpaw glanced over at Berrypaw, who, to her surprise, was talking to Iceheart of all cats.

She was talking about teaching RiverClan a lesson before we fought, and now she's chatting with the cat that took Hawkstar's first life. Brookpaw would be very happy on the day, if it ever came, when she started to understand the red tabby.

Slowly, she made her way over to the den Silvershine had taken them to earlier. Rabbitflight was already inside (sulking probably), as was Applefall. She looked up, her light green eyes bright as she watched her daughter come in.

"Find any friendly cats out there?' She asked.

"One apprentice, and three kits."

"Crowstar's kits?"

"Yeah."

Brookpaw laid down on a soft bit of moss and feathers that hadn't been in the den earlier. "Did Larchpaw and Silvershine bring this?"

Applefall nodded. "I told them not to waste it all on us, but Silvershine insisted. I really can't complain though, because this is the softest nest I've ever been in."

Brookpaw smiled and glanced over at Rabbitflight. "Is he okay?"

"He was sulking, though I think he finally fell asleep." Applefall gave an exasperated sigh. "Sometimes he's the nicest, funniest cat, then sometimes he's-"

"...An annoying, very sensitive idiot," Brookpaw finished, "I know."

There was a silence. Brookpaw realized Applefall must have been a lot like herself when she was younger. When they did talk to each other, they seemed to know what the other one would say. And they noticed the same things. *But what happened to her?*

Brookpaw felt her eyes beginning to close, and she gave in to sleep.

Despite the wonderful nest, it was still very cold the next morning. The snow had stopped, but it seemed worse than yesterday.

She woke early. The sky was barely light, yet Brookpaw knew there was no way she was going back to sleep. Slowly she stood up, trying not to wake the others. Hawkstar and Berrypaw must have joined them in the den sometime after she fell asleep, as they were both here now. Berrypaw had isolated herself by the opposite den wall, and Hawkstar was curled in between Rabbitflight and Applefall.

I need to go for a walk. Carefully, she stepped over the other cats and out into the chilly morning air. She saw no RiverClan cats up yet. But barely after that thought went through her head, a strange feeling that she was being watched came over her.

"You're up early," came the smooth voice of Slywhisker.

Brookpaw flattened her ears. "You're creepy." She pushed her way past him, making an effort not to look into his silvery eyes, and headed for the reeds that lined the river.

"Since when have ThunderClan cats started swimming during leaf-bare?" The gray tom meowed after her. Wait, no. He was right next to her.

Great, he's like Ravenfoot, sneaking around all over the place.

"Leave me alone," she hissed under her breath, though a small part of her didn't want him to go. *What's wrong with me? I should hate him. He helped Willowlight*. But the feeling didn't go away, and Slywhisker showed no signs of leaving.

"How dumb do you think I am? You're an enemy cat. I wouldn't leave you alone in my clan's camp if the world was ending."

Unfortunately, he had a point. Brookpaw cursed to herself, and shot him a glare. "Fine. But don't talk to me."

Slywhisker smirked at her, and she sighed. Why did he have to be so annoying?

"I also think the fact that you are an enemy cat does not give you the right to tell me to be quiet in my own territory. So tell me Brookpaw; are you afraid of the water?"

She'd been so focused on how annoying Slywhisker was, she hadn't realized they'd been walking very near to the edge of the river. Slywhisker grinned and pushed her into the freezing water.

Now, it was not water she hated. Swimming had never bothered her. She'd been found playing in a stream when she was a kit, for StarClan's sake! It was the fact that it was freezing that truly scared her. She'd heard tales of cats who'd been in cold water for too long and had died. Brookpaw wasn't quite ready to go to StarClan, so, after being forced underwater for a moment, she began to paddle diagonally towards the shore, flowing with the current slightly so she didn't wear herself out. Her movement wasn't quite as graceful as the RiverClan cats, but it kept her afloat. Once she reached solid ground, she shook out her silver tabby pelt, sending water droplets everywhere, and coughed out what water that had managed to get down her throat.

The camp was a little ways upriver.

"Where did you learn to swim?"

Slywhisker was back. *Mouse dung.*

"Mind your own business, you foxheart." She shivered. *I better get someplace warm.* "Why don't you escort me back to camp then, so I don't freeze to death."

The gray tom looked genuinely shocked. "I'm sorry, I should've thought about *coldsleep*." His silver eyes sparkled, and Brookpaw knew he'd thought about coldsleep *long* before pushing her in. Maybe he'd planned this all last night.

"Ah. So you're slowly picking off the rest of us, just like you killed Mistfur and took one of Hawkstar's lives."

Slywhisker sniffed. "I wasn't there when Mistfur was killed."

"But you were part of Willowlight's little death squad. At least I've taken care of her."

Strangely, she still didn't feel sorry about hurting the evil she-cat. *Does that make me just like her?*

"And you won't survive either if you don't get warmed up."

She sighed. "I'm not going back to camp until you tell me what the point of all this was."

Slywhisker, of course, smirked. "Just to remind you that our lives are much more fragile than we tend to think they are, and that you need to be careful. They say to keep your friends close..." He paused, probably for dramatic effect. Brookpaw sensed him circling around behind her. Then he hissed in her ear, "...And your enemies closer."

Brookpaw felt a chill run through her that had nothing to do with the coldsleep. This cat could go from annoying to terrifying in the blink of an eye. She tried to stand up again, but her limbs were beginning to numb. The terrifying thought that Slywhisker would leave her out here, frozen to death, passed through her mind.

"Oh dear, can't you walk?"

Determined to fight the numbing and to prove him wrong, Brookpaw forced herself to take a step. *This feels so weird. I could step on a bramble and feel nothing at all.*

"Now remember; to walk, you put one paw in front of the other..."

"Shut up, you."

She made it a few more steps before she stumbled.

"I'm sorry, Brookpaw, I really am," Slywhisker purred.

"Stop lying to me and get me back to camp. Please."

The gray tom peered innocently at her. "How?"

She'd really had enough now. "Slywhisker, you absolute *foxheart*, *drag* me back there if you have to."

For once, he did as she asked. Taking her scruff in between his teeth, he began dragging her back towards the camp, with

remarkable speed for a cat his size. Somehow he managed to drag her into the den Crowstar had let the ThunderClan cats use without anyone noticing. Brookpaw couldn't tell if it was warmer in here or not, as she was still numb.

"I'll get help," he meowed softly, then disappeared out the entrance.

I hate you, she thought, though she didn't.

"One of the stupid ThunderClan apprentices snuck out this morning and fell into the river," came the faint voice of Slywhisker. "I brought her back to camp, but she's succumbing to coldsleep as we speak."

Brookpaw heard the voice of Silvershine reply, "Then get Applefall. You know there's nothing I can do for her with herbs." Underneath it all was a tone of scorn, as if she knew *exactly* what had happened at the river.

Nothing more was said, and Brookpaw assumed Slywhisker had gone to fetch Applefall. Oddly, she didn't feel concerned that there was nothing Silvershine could do for her. She simply didn't care. All of her thoughts were starting to become fuzzy and confusing. Maybe Silvershine hadn't said that at all. Maybe this was all a dream, a dream that she needed to wake up from...

"Brookpaw!"

Two light-colored cats stood in front of her, looking very serious.

"Applefall," she said drowsily, "why are there two of you?"

The two cats looked at each other, and one cursed.

"Come on, we have to get her up," Hawkstar meowed. "She has to move to get warmed up again."

"That's what Silvershine said, but how is she supposed to move if her legs are numb?!" Applefall hissed.

"We'll have to hold her up until she gets some feeling back in her

legs, then."

Before she knew what was happening, the two cats had Brookpaw wedged between them.

"This isn't going to work," Applefall meowed.

"Trust me. Minkpelt got coldsleep once when we were apprentices, and this is how Pearwhisker and Aspenglow saved her."

"How the heck did Minkpelt get coldsleep?"

"She jumped into the stream."

Applefall snorted. "Typical. You see, that's why I hung out with Sharppaw and—" she stopped herself and became silent.

Hawkstar, knowing what she almost had said, quickly changed the subject. "Let's just focus on warming her up."

Slowly, Brookpaw started to feel again. It was faint, of course, to begin with, but eventually she could flex her paw and think more clearly. It was then Hawkstar and Applefall dumped her in the snow.

"Move around," Hawkstar meowed, "It'll warm you up."

Yeah, I'll get warmed up if I frolic around in the cold snow. But Brookpaw knew what he meant. She stumbled to her feet, trying to ignore the smug glances from Berrypaw. *Oh, she'll get a lot of leverage out of this*. In fact, she'd never hear the end of it. The rest of the day would probably be filled with comments like, *Hey Brookpaw, maybe they should name you Brookfrost*. Or *Hey Brookpaw, do you wanna patrol along the river? I know you're* dying *to*. Or maybe even, *Hey Brookpaw, I'd hunt with you, but you're as cold as a lump of ice.*

Oh Slywhisker, do you even know what you've done? As if on cue, the gray tom smirked at her from across the clearing.

Determined to defy his and Berrypaw's eventual view on the situation, Brookpaw managed to take a few shaky steps forward. Applefall watched from a distance, which she appreciated. Even though her mother wasn't one to fuss over her, the last thing Berrypaw needed to add to her large supply of snarky comments was Applefall catching Brookpaw as she fell.

Hawkstar sat near Applefall, and they seemed to be talking absentmindedly to each other. Brookpaw wondered briefly what they were talking about, and then tried to refocus on walking. Her paws and legs were still slightly numb, but she took a few more steps forward. Gradually she worked herself up so that she could take a lap around the clearing. To her disappointment, the kits weren't out, but she could hardly blame them, as it was almost as cold as her outside.

Not very many of the RiverClan cats were around. A dark brown she-cat with reddish flecks in her fur dipped her head in greeting as she passed by, heading for the reeds that surrounded the camp. A ginger tom with a missing eye eyed her from in front of what Brookpaw assumed was the warriors den. And that was about it. Crowstar briefly dashed out from his den, then he made for the reeds, following the path the she-cat had went.

Hawkstar had been right. The numbness was almost gone now, but she was still very cold, even with her fluffy leaf-bare coat. She caught her leader's eye and asked a silent question. *Am I okay now*? Hawkstar shook his head. He said something to Applefall, then walked over to Brookpaw.

"Keep moving. We have to leave RiverClan territory today, and we have to have you back to normal."

She sighed. "Thanks though, for 'saving' me."

"Applefall helped."

"I know."

There was an awkward pause, then Hawkstar meowed, "Go on, keep moving." His gold-green eye gave her a troubled look, and

Brookpaw wondered if he believed what Slywhisker had said about her falling in.

Shaking her head, she padded away to take another lap around the camp.

It was near sun-high when all the ThunderClan cats gathered together to leave. Rabbitflight had also tried to take a walk, and had been gone for most of the day, until he was discovered by the reddish-brown she-cat, Plumwhisker, and her patrol. He'd been blamed for spying, and the RiverClan cats had been pretty eager for them to leave after that.

Brookpaw was feeling much better now. She'd done what Hawkstar told her, and had finished quite a few laps around the camp when he and Crowstar announced that it was time for them to go. A few comments were exchanged between the two leaders, then Hawkstar beckoned to his clanmates, and they were off. *That's it? Aren't you going to explain what you've been discussing?* Brookpaw shook her head, and slowly trudged after the others.

It was pretty slow going, as the snow had begun falling again. Slywhisker and Silvershine had offered to walk them to the border, though Brookpaw wished they hadn't. Once again she felt completely uncomfortable in Slywhisker's presence as they walked along. Every once in a while he'd turn and smirk at her, as if he knew how she felt and was enjoying making her feel that way.

What a foxheart, she thought, and tried to ignore him. Between Slywhisker and the accumulating snow, the walk upriver had become very long.

Rabbitflight and Berrypaw weren't helping. They'd started to exchange comments about how stupid the RiverClan cats were, thinking ThunderClan couldn't find the stepping stones again. Of course they were saying all of this under their breath, but Brookpaw could make out pieces of it. *Since when did you two start to get along*? Berrypaw had been insulting Rabbitflight just the other day. Once again she thought about praising the day she finally understood the

red tabby.

"We'll leave you here," Silvershine meowed. Her voice was soft and velvety, like Slywhisker's, but was more gentle, more kind. "You can see the stones from here."

Sure enough, the dark stones in the middle of the river were visible now.

Hawkstar and Applefall bid her farewell, and continued on. Berrypaw and Rabbitflight followed, not even glancing at the RiverClan cats.

"Thank you," Brookpaw told the medicine cat.

Silvershine gave her a look. "For what, dear?"

"Not shredding my fur. Or drowning me or anything." She managed to give Slywhisker a meaningful look when she mentioned drowning.

Silvershine laughed, "Go on now, or you'll get left behind." She dipped her head to the apprentice and began to walk away. When she was out of earshot, Brookpaw quickly hissed to Slywhisker, "Don't push anyone else, except maybe Berrypaw if you get the chance, in the river, okay?"

Before he could reply, she bounded off through the snow towards her clanmates, smirking the entire way.

Chapter Thirteen

[image] [image]

"Amberkit, step forward."

Brookpaw proudly watched her friend as Hawkstar summoned him. In fact, she felt almost as proud as Amberkit's parents, Firelight and Grasscloud.

"Do you promise to train with all your ability and to learn to serve your clan?" Hawkstar meowed, his gold-green eye blazing.

"I do."

"Then from this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Amberpaw. Snowblaze, you shall mentor him. Pass on your strength and loyalty."

The clan cheered.

Brookpaw was both happy and sad. Happy that her friend would be training alongside her now, sad that she would no longer be the one training him. *Well, hopefully I've at least given him a head start.*

Amberpaw tried to make his way over to her, but Snowblaze cut him off before he could. Brookpaw heard the white tom say something about going to see the borders, then he shuffled Amberpaw off towards the entrance.

She shot Ravenfoot a look. *Can we go with them?*

Her mentor shrugged. "I don't see why not."

They bounded off towards the gorse tunnel after the two cats.

"Hold up, Snowblaze," Ravenfoot called, "We're coming too. It won't hurt to stretch our legs a bit."

That, Brookpaw thought as they padded through the extremely

thick snow, *was an overstatement*. Nevertheless she was happy to be with her friend. It had been a while since she'd really had fun. The battle with Willowlight's happy little death squad had been about a moon ago, and since then leaf-bare had really settled in. So far, there had been no more incidents with the neighboring clan. Hawkstar and Crowstar had agreed to not battle over Sunningrocks until green-leaf, giving their clans time to recover and think it through some more.

Still, Brookpaw wondered if the RiverClan would keep his word until then.

"Where are we going first?" Amberpaw asked, his big golden eyes wide.

Snowblaze thought for a moment. "I think we'll only do half the territory today. We'll go up to Fourtrees first, then circle around the border until we get to Twolegplace."

Avoiding RiverClan, then. Excellent. That meant there would be no encounters with with Iceheart or Slywhisker.

Brookpaw cursed herself for even thinking about him. She knew she should hate him. She tried to convince herself that she did. But deep down, she knew she simply couldn't. Surely no one could hate that smooth voice and those occasionally charming remarks... she scowled. *Is there no making sense of this*? She thought irritably.

"Do you guys smell that?" Amberpaw meowed quietly.

Broken from her thoughts, Brookpaw tasted the air. "Smells like a cat. A rogue, probably."

Ravenfoot nodded. "We could split up. Brookpaw and I could track down the scent and you two could continue your tour."

"But—" Amberpaw cut himself off.

Brookpaw knew he wanted to come along, too. *He was the one who'd found the scent, after all*. She spoke up. "Nah, we could stick together. The scent is fresh. It probably wouldn't take long to find the rogue."

Snowblaze seemed to consider this, and Amberpaw shot her a grateful look. She smiled at him and waited for his mentor's reply.

"Okay, fine," Snowblaze meowed. "But let's make it quick."

Brookpaw and Amberpaw lead the way, working together to track the scent. Thankfully, it was much stronger than the scent she and Leafpaw had tried to follow a couple moons ago. It lead them near the Thunderpath, heading in the direction of Twolegplace.

The fumes of monsters made Brookpaw's nose twitch. *Why would anything want to live in this place*? Eventually the scent became so mixed with all the other smells of the Twolegplace that she and Amberpaw lost the trail.

"It was probably just a rogue passing through," Snowblaze meowed. "If we find them on our territory again, we'll teach them a lesson." He sounded dismissive, as if his comment ended the whole search.

"We can't just give up now!" Brookpaw insisted. "Leafpaw and I found another scent a little while ago, another rogue, we think. Maybe this is related to-"

"Since when is the scent of a rogue a strange thing? We encounter several a season." Snowblaze seemed amused.

"I don't know, I just-"

"I appreciate your concern for making others respect our borders, Brookpaw, but letting one rogue go isn't going to hurt anything. Besides, we'll never find the scent again here. Let's just get going with the tour."

Brookpaw shot a desperate glance at Ravenfoot. *Please, help me out here*. But for once her mentor didn't seem to be on her side. He shook his head slightly, which translated into *it's not worth it.*

Defeated, Brookpaw let out a small sigh. She really had no idea why she was so determined to find this rogue. Was it just instinct? Hadn't Ravenfoot said for her to trust her instincts? So much for that idea. She wouldn't be able to sneak into Twolegplace, not with Snowblaze and Ravenfoot watching her. Besides, she'd never been

there before, and wouldn't choose to go there unless she had to.

The tour of the territory felt long and dull to her, even with Amberpaw bounding along excitedly the whole time.

"Wow, I never knew the territory was so big!" He exclaimed when they reached the Twolegplace border once again.

"And that's only half of it," Snowblaze meowed. "We'll look at the other side tomorrow."

The four cats squeezed through the gorse tunnel and back into the camp.

Berrypaw and Leafpaw were chatting with each other near the apprentices den. Probably about their assessments. The two sisters were due to become warriors anytime now. Brookpaw couldn't help noticing how they'd matured (at least in looks) since she'd first joined them in the apprentices den. Berrypaw had actually become one of the prettiest cats in the clan, with her dark red pelt, bright yellow eyes, and lean but strong build. Brookpaw supposed that was one of the reasons Rabbitflight had started hanging out with her.

No, she was not jealous. But it did make her feel a bit sad whenever she saw them chatting and laughing together. Only a few moons ago he, Fallingleaf, and herself had been good friends. But something had changed in Rabbitflight. Or perhaps in herself. Suddenly the white and orange tom had started to annoy her instead of making her laugh. Suddenly his humorous grin had become arrogant. Suddenly Brookpaw had lost a friend to her rival.

"I wonder what our names will be," she heard Berrypaw meow. "I'd like to be Berryclaw, but there are already so many 'claws' in the clan."

It was odd to hear the red tabby talking like an apprentice on their first day. *No offense intended, Amberpaw*.

"Leafwind sounds neat. Or maybe Leafdawn."

Berrypaw rolled her eyes. "You sound like you want to be named like a medicine cat! I want a *fierce* sounding name!"

Brookpaw saw Aspenglow's ears perk up when Berrypaw mentioned 'medicine cat'. The light tabby rolled her eyes and continued to sort the herbs she was sending to Silvershine.

The sisters continued to argue about their possible names, and eventually Brookpaw grew tired is listening to them. So, she decided to visit Duskpelt.

The gray tabby was stretched out in her nest, half awake. Twigtail followed her example in her own nest. Dustscar and Shalefire were chattering away, as if it was a bright, warm, new-leaf day outside. Brookpaw smiled.

"Ah, Brookpaw. You want to join the conversation?" Shalefire asked. The silver tabby couldn't help but to notice how much better he seemed since he'd retired. His sickness had gone away completely now, and his yellow eyes were bright and alert. He looked as if he was around Stormclaw's age. *Is he? Was he just so sick it made him seem older?*

She nodded to the former leader. "Sure, but if you don't mind, I'm going to see if Amberpaw needs some company real quick."

Sticking her head out of the end of the log, Brookpaw scanned the clearing for her friend. She saw him sitting near the apprentices den, looking absentmindedly at the ground.

"Hey!" She gestured with her tail for him to come over.

Perking up instantly, Amberpaw bounded towards her, his golden eyes wide. "What?"

"You looked lonely, and I figured you'd want to talk with Dustscar and Shalefire with me."

If it was possible, his eyes widened even more. *Geez, his eyes are so big.* They made him look so much younger sometimes than he actually was.

"Come on, they're waiting," she meowed and crawled back in the den.

Amberpaw followed her in and took a seat beside Dustscar. "Hi," he meowed nervously.

Dustscar dipped his head in greeting, as did Shalefire.

Brookpaw took the opportunity to ask, "Um, what are you guys talking about?" She assumed it was some tale she'd heard from Duskpelt before, but Shalefire's answer surprised her.

"The days before I became leader, when Pondstar was still alive."

Brookpaw filed through her memory, trying to think of a time when a cat named Pondstar was mentioned, but nothing came to mind. Suddenly her hopes rose. *Would any of this explain Applefall's past?*

"I know you've probably never heard of her, but in truth it wasn't too long ago that she ruled ThunderClan," Shalefire meowed matter of factly.

"Why isn't she mentioned, then?" Amberpaw asked. "Was she a bad leader?"

Dustscar's eyes widened. "No, not at all. She was one of the greatest. Rumor has it she gave all of her lives for her clan."

"It's simply because so many of the cats that grew up under her reign died during the battle of the wolves and during the sickness afterward," Shalefire finished.

"So you were deputy then?" Brookpaw asked the black and white tom.

"Not at first. Pondstar's first deputy was Poppyflame."

Dustscar sighed. "Oh Starclan, she was a lovely cat. Friendly, kind, smart, but also extremely loyal."

Duskpelt snorted from the other side of the den. "He's still mooning over her."

The cream-colored tom rolled his eyes, but didn't deny it.

"What happened to her?" Amberpaw asked.

"It's a bit complicated," Shalefire began. "The ShadowClan deputy at the time, Bluethorn—"

At the mention of Bluethorn, Dustscar growled and muttered darkly to himself. Shalefire shot him a look that wasn't quite stern yet wasn't quite nice either.

"As I was saying, Bluethorn fell in love with her, and tried to force her to leave ThunderClan and to join him. But Poppyflame was much too loyal to ever do that. She also didn't share his feelings. So she told Bluethorn no. And, in his anger, he killed her."

Brookpaw felt shock spread throughout her body. "He *killed* her?!

Shalefire gave her a sorrowful glance. "Love can do terrible as well as wonderful things to us."

The silver tabby felt that there was something more in his remark than just repeating a saying. Had Shalefire had a cat he was in love with do something terrible? Or had something terrible happened to a mate of his? She didn't dare ask. Not now.

"And so I was appointed deputy, though it was a close call between me and Fernclaw."

"Wasn't she *your* first deputy?" Amberpaw meowed, eyes wide.

"That's right," said Shalefire, "And a very good one. I think her only fault is that she was a bit too serious."

"But she got things done," Dustscar meowed. "I miss her, too."

Amberpaw and Brookpaw looked at each other, then asked in unison, "And what happened to her?"

"She died in the bout of greencough after the battle of the wolves."

"Ah." *This conversation is cheery.*

Shalefire twitched his tail and spoke up again. "But let's go back to when both Fernclaw and Poppyflame were still alive. As Duskpelt can tell you, one time we had two big dogs show up near the camp, barking like mad. They were trying to get into our camp, but the gorse barrier was keeping them outside for the moment."

"You make it sound as if we were all cowering inside the camp," Duskpelt rasped. "Dustscar, Poppyflame, and I went out first to chase them off. At the time we didn't realize how big they were. As soon as we saw them, Poppyflame went back to get more cats."

"So it was the two of you against two giant dogs," Amberpaw said.

"Well, I dealt with one of 'em," Duskpelt meowed proudly. "Chased him all the way to Twolegplace. Dogs are so mouse-brained."

Brookpaw had heard that story before. "And the other?"

"Poppyflame and I fought her off," Dustscar meowed.

"I thought you said she went back to get more cats."

"She did. But they barely had the opportunity to help because Poppyflame made it back sooner than they did and helped me fight the dog off."

Dustscar looked like he could go on and on about it, but before he could Amberpaw let loose an enormous yawn.

"Sorry," he muttered sleepily.

"You'd better get some rest," Duskpelt told him sternly. "You too, Brookpaw."

She honestly couldn't object to that. She wasn't learning anything about her mother's past, though she had learned that Shalefire could be nice, and possibly charismatic.

"Thanks for inviting us to join you," Brookpaw meowed, and dipped her heads to the older cats.

Shalefire dipped his head in turn and bid her and Amberpaw

farewell.

They stepped back outside and began making their way to the apprentices den. The sky had cleared and was darkening fast. Stars gleamed down on them alongside the now waning moon. The gathering had been only a few days ago. Brookpaw had seen Swiftpaw again, but Breezepaw had apparently been unable to come. Thankfully it had been much more peaceful than the last gathering, and she'd had time to really talk to Swiftpaw. Underneath his shyness, he really was a nice cat. WindClan was lucky to have him.

"That was nice," Amberpaw meowed, "but really short. Why'd they even invite us to join the conversation? We couldn't even add anything to it except to ask how all those cats died." His orange-yellow eyes saddened. "It seems like times were pretty bad after the battle of the wolves."

"Oh yes, the *battle of the wolves*," Brookpaw scowled. "Everyone seems to bring it up, but I still know barely anything about it!"

"I heard Dustscar say that wolves had moved in below the clan territories, and had killed a few cats."

"Me too, but that doesn't explain what happened to my mother."

Amberpaw gave her a look. "What do you mean?"

She glanced around the clearing and said softly, "I'll tell you in the den. Come on."

"You mean she won't tell you anything? Not even who your father is?"

Brookpaw sighed. "No. I tried asking when I was a kit, but she only got mad and irritated when I brought it up. Whoever my father is, he must be a jerk or something."

"Does it bother you a lot?"

"Not knowing who my father is?"

"Yeah."

There was a silence. Brookpaw couldn't help but to think how nice it was to be telling somebody how she felt. She'd kept all this to herself for moons.

"It bothers me more that Applefall just won't explain anything. What happened that could make her be that way? Did she do something so wrong she's afraid I'll hate her if I know?"

Amberpaw considered this for a moment, then meowed, "Did you ever think that maybe she just wants to protect you from your father in her own confusing way? Assuming he's bad, of course."

She hadn't. "So you mean she might be trying to keep me from knowing about him so I don't become like him?"

"Something like that."

It was a possibility. But there was no way to prove it. Not now, at least.

"I-I tried asking Duskpelt about him once," she meowed softly. "But she gave me a dark look and said that was something Applefall should tell me about." She sighed.

Amberpaw yawned and stretched his paws forward. Immediately she felt guilty about keeping him up to talk about her problems. *What kind of friend am I?*

"Go to sleep," she told him, "I'm fine."

He glanced down at the nest they'd hastily put together. "Talking sounds more appealing."

Brookpaw rolled her eyes. "Let's swap then." She had a feeling that she wouldn't be getting much sleep anyway.

Amberpaw's eyes widened. "No, that isn't what I meant! That wouldn't be fair-"

He's so cute, she thought. "No, seriously, it's fine. I'm not that tired."

He tried to protest again, but Brookpaw ignored him and stood up, stretching, before she nudged her friend out of his nest and into hers.

"Hey, just because you're bigger than me-"

"Goodnight, Amberpaw."

The reddish apprentice gave her a look, but settled down in the nest, letting out a sigh as he did so.

Brookpaw smirked. *I'm so glad he's here now*. Now if only Hawkstar would make Berrypaw and Leafpaw warriors... She would miss Leafpaw, to be honest, but unfortunately the calico was part of a package deal if it meant getting Berrypaw out of the apprentices den. She sighed, trying to get comfortable in the makeshift nest. Eventually she did fall asleep, but naturally it was filled with nightmares.

The first one wasn't too bad. At first. It mostly involved Berrypaw taunting her, but then Rabbitflight joined the red tabby, and Brookpaw was forced to listen as the two cats cackled and jeered at her.

The second one? Terrifying. In it she and Amberpaw were being chased by a fox towards the gorge. Amberpaw was running out of energy, and he slowed down for moment-only to be snatched up by the fox. Brookpaw shrieked, and turned to fight the fox when suddenly the gorge appeared right behind her. Someone was calling her name from the other side, but she didn't have time to look for who it was before the fox snapped at her with it's bloodied fangs, causing her to jump back straight into the gorge.

Darkcloud casually flicked his tail back and forth, scanning his surroundings from atop the wooden fence. Scarlet sat beside him, licking her forepaw.

"Ozzy spotted another cat near the border yesterday," she meowed

in between licks.

"A rogue?"

"Nah, another kittypet, we think. He didn't have a collar, but he was too well-groomed to be a rogue. Ozzy said he told him to get lost."

Darkcloud gave her an amused look as he watched her clean off her paw.

"What?" She asked, glaring at him.

He chose not to answer her question. Mostly for dramatic effect. "You said Frost had managed to find a few more recruits?"

"Yeah. Two toms, Harley and Sturgis, and one she-cat, Spark. They all seem okay." She began working on her other forepaw. "You think we have enough now?"

The black tabby nodded. "ThunderClan's numbers were low when I left. They can't have risen that much."

Unless of course—he didn't want to think about it. It would only make things more complicated. *Much, much more complicated.*

Chapter Fourteen

[image] [image] [image]

Brookpaw woke early, still troubled by her dreams. Worriedly she looked over at Amberpaw, but he seemed fine, curled up comfortably in the nest. Letting out a small sigh of relief, she carefully stepped over Berrypaw and Leafpaw before exiting the den.

No more snow had fallen, and strangely it felt rather humid out, but the sky was clear. Brookpaw fluffed up her fur anyway and looked around to see if Ravenfoot was up yet. She found the black-legged tom grooming himself near the warriors den. Besides for him and herself, Hawkstar was the only other cat out.

Ravenfoot didn't even look up as she made her way over to him. He simply acted like she'd been here all along. "Nice day."

"I believe you mean morning."

"Whatever you want to call it." He began grooming his tail.

"What are we doing today?"

"Something special."

Of course, he gave her no information on what the "special" thing was. Brookpaw gave him a dull look and meowed, "We're going to the Moonstone, aren't we?"

At last Ravenfoot looked up at her. He was smirking. "Clever you. Go see if Aspenglow is up and ask her for some traveling herbs."

"Is anyone else going with us?"

"No."

Fantastic, she thought, *I get to be away from Berrypaw for a whole*

day! She did as her mentor asked and went to see if Aspenglow was up. She wasn't. The light brown tabby was curled up in her nest, sound asleep.

Brookpaw sighed. *Great.* Aspenglow seemed like the type of cat that would be very grumpy in the morning, and she really didn't want to be the one to wake her up. Tentatively, she tapped the medicine cat on her shoulder.

Aspenglow grumbled something, and slowly opened her green eyes. "What?" She snapped.

"Sorry I had to wake you-"

"Yeah, me too."

Brookpaw paused. Was she really that grumpy or did Aspenglow have a sense of humor? The medicine cat's reaction didn't answer her question. She rose from her nest, stretched, and walked over to her store of herbs. "What do you need? Traveling herbs?"

The silver tabby nodded, then realized Aspenglow had her back to her and hadn't seen her. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Well," Aspenglow pushed two bundles of herbs towards her, "it's about time Ravenfoot takes you to the Moonstone. You're closer to being a warrior than you think."

Brookpaw felt her pelt heat up in embarrassment. "Berrypaw and Leafpaw are much closer than me."

Aspenglow smiled. It was one of the only times Brookpaw had ever seen her do so. "Perhaps Leafpaw is, yes."

Did she just insult Berrypaw? She felt a smile of her own forming on her face as what Aspenglow had said registered in her mind.

"The herbs will taste bitter, but they'll give you strength. You're going to need it. It's a long trek from here to the Highstones in leaf-bare."

Brookpaw nodded and thanked the medicine cat, picking up the

bundles gently with her teeth. Exiting the den, she made her way back over to Ravenfoot, who gave her a surprised look as she dropped his share of the herbs at his feet.

"That was quick," he commented.

"Not really."

"Was Aspenglow up?"

"No."

Ravenfoot gaped at her. "You woke her up?"

"Was I wrong to?"

He shook his head. "No, it's an essential part of any cat's training to have to wake up Aspenglow at least *once*."

She smiled. "So what's so impressive, then?"

"Well, she usually takes forever to get up, and then she's so cranky you have to be careful about everything you say that by the time you get the herbs it's nearly sunhigh."

Actually, her question had been answered. Aspenglow *was* humorous. *She must act really cranky in the mornings just to amuse herself*. She grinned again. "I must have gotten lucky."

"So it would seem."

There was a short silence.

"Come on," Ravenfoot meowed, "eat your herbs. I want to get going soon."

The herbs were bitter, as usual. But Brookpaw made no complaint. How could she? *I'm going to the Moonstone!*

She and Ravenfoot left a short while later. By then a few more cats had emerged from their dens, including Emberheart, Stormclaw,

and Fallingleaf. Hawkstar and Emberheart had discussed the morning patrols, and then Ravenfoot had told Brookpaw that they were leaving. She was finding it hard to hide her excitement. *I wonder which StarClan cat I'll see*, she thought.

Ravenfoot glanced at her, a trace of a smile upon his face. "Nervous?"

Currently they were climbing out of the ravine that the camp sat in. Brookpaw finished leaping up the slope and turned back to face her mentor. "Sort of. I'm mostly excited, though."

"That's good. When you're excited about going somewhere, you're more likely to actually get there. This isn't exactly going to be a nice little stroll."

Brookpaw thought about how many of her nice little "strolls" had turned into border fights. *Hopefully this won't end the same way*. "We're going to have to go through WindClan territory, right?"

Ravenfoot nodded once he's cleared the slope. "Yes, but they should grant us safe passage to the Moonstone, so we should be okay. It doesn't hurt that we're on pretty good terms with Smokestar as well." He took off into the brambles.

She followed, wondering if she'd run into Swiftpaw as she weaved in and out of the brush. The undergrowth wasn't nearly as thick this time of year, but usually the snow made up for that, making it so they had to lift their paws higher off the ground than usually. Today the snow seemed to have melted slightly. At first she and Ravenfoot had been able to walk in top of it, but as the day wore on, it had started to become slushy so that their paws sunk into it with every step they took.

What's up with this weather? She thought.

They were nearly at Fourtrees now. The walk through the forest had been nice, but unsettling in a way. Where Brookpaw knew the scents of prey should be coming from, there was nothing. The only bit of life she'd seen or smelled was a chickadee bouncing around in the upper brambles. *I hope prey isn't scarce this leaf-bare, too.*

"Come on, keep up," Ravenfoot called back to her. "We need to be in WindClan territory by sunhigh."

How can we even tell if it's sunhigh or not? It's cloudy. In fact, the clouds were so dark and thick she was convinced more snow was on the way. Nevertheless she trotted after her mentor, not saying anything until they reached Fourtrees.

As they descended into the clearing, Brookpaw realized she was warm. Warmer than she should be in leaf-bare. She glanced up at the dark clouds again. *Starclan, what are you doing sending this bad weather*? The silver tabby wasn't expecting a reply. And she received none. *I guess that's a question I'll have to save for later*. Then another thought hit her. *What if it doesn't clear up before midnight?* Fallingleaf had told her a little about her trip to the moonstone, and how the sky had to be clear for it all to work out properly.

Suddenly a crack of thunder rolled across the sky, scaring both her and Ravenfoot.

"What in Starclan—" the black-legged tom hissed, but was cut off by another clap of thunder.

Brookpaw felt a drop of water hit her nose, and she had a bad feeling it wasn't from snow melting off a branch. The wind had picked up too, and was rattling the bare treetops above her like an adder's tail.

She glanced worriedly at Ravenfoot. "Should we turn back?" Although she tried to hide it, her voice was obviously laced with fear.

At first Ravenfoot didn't answer. More drops had started falling, and the thunder sounded closer. "Do you ever wonder what it's like to be in WindClan?" He asked her, green eyes blazing.

Brookpaw narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Because you're going to find out. Now *run*. Towards the Highstones."

She wanted to say, *are you crazy?!* But she held her tongue.

Ravenfoot was her mentor, a friend even. She could trust him.

Taking one deep breath, she thought *here goes nothing* and took off into WindClan territory.

The rain splashed down around them as they ran, creating small streams in the slopes of the moor. Lightning flashed, lighting up the whole snow-covered moor in a way that could only be described as beautifully terrifying. The silver tabby continued to run, straining her muscles as she ran uphill.

"Keep going!" Ravenfoot called from behind her.

Why in Starclan is it storming in leaf-bare?! She thought for the hundredth time since the first bout of thunder.

The slope was becoming slippery, and she let out a curse as she fell. Before she could even get up she felt teeth in her scruff pulling her up onto her feet.

"Come on," Ravenfoot hissed urgently.

Brookpaw began running again, only to realize that they still had to cross the thunderpath.

"Don't worry, and twoleg or monsters would be mouse-brained to be out in this weather," her mentor meowed as they ran.

So what does that make us? She thought dryly. He was right, though. She couldn't see any beady, bright eyes of the monsters that usually ran on the thunderpath. Charging down the slope after her mentor, they barely even bothered to check for the foul beasts before they hurtled across the smooth, stone-like path.

"Now we're out of WindClan territory," Ravenfoot hissed. His pelt was so soaked it clung to his form like a bur, making the already lean tom look like a twig. Brookpaw didn't even want to imagine what *she* looked like. She cursed the rain and sprang forward after Ravenfoot again.

Thunder rumbled again, making a sound too similar to the sound Dustscar's stomach sometimes made for comfort. A few

seconds later lightning flashed.

The storm's nearly on top of us now. If she hadn't been running for her life, Brookpaw might've appreciated the view of the Highstones they now had. The peaks loomed out at them from the foggy haze that had settled over the land like ghosts.

Mud skidded up from their paws. If it was possible, the rain had picked up even more. Brookpaw felt like she was soaked to the bone. Slowly, the ground was becoming more solid. The reddish soil was giving way to stone underneath the now thin layer of snow. *That's a good sign, right*?

"We're almost there!" Ravenfoot howled above the harsh patter of rain.

She certainly hoped so. Her lungs felt burnt out, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep running. *My paws feel like boulders.*

Suddenly they were scurrying up a stone slope, towards the side of a cliff. Gravel flew out from under their feet. The thunder boomed threateningly at them one last time before Ravenfoot disappeared into the side of the cliff. Brookpaw realized he'd gone down a tunnel. The Mothermouth.

"It's fine!" His voice sounded muffled.

"It isn't flooded in there?!"

She would've bet her share of fresh kill that he rolled his eyes. "The rain runs off the slope out there, down towards the Thunderpath. Not into here. Come on!"

The silver tabby took a deep breath and entered the tunnel. To her surprise, the air wasn't as stuffy and humid in here. It became even cooler as they padded downwards. She couldn't see much, but the tunnel was narrow enough for the farthest top of her whiskers to scrape along the sides. It was extremely uncomfortable, not being able to see the sky, or even the treetops. Brookpaw felt like the stone roof of the tunnel could fall in on her at any moment.

Ravenfoot's tail was her only guide. She touched her nose to it as they crawled through the dark chute, following him down until she nearly ran into him.

"We're here," he murmured.

Where?! She thought incredulously. Then she realized that air was even less stuffy than in the tunnel, and that more of it was moving in here. "Are we in a cave?"

"Yes."

Brookpaw took a tentative step forward. Her paw landed in a puddle.

"I thought you said it wouldn't be flooded!" Her meow echoed slightly in the cavern.

"There's only one little puddle there."

"How can you tell?"

When he didn't answer, Brookpaw began to look around, in vain, she supposed, but then froze as she spotted the small hole in the roof of the cave. A small trickle of faint light came through it, and slowly her eyes adapted to the darkness. The puddle was directly under the hole. Ravenfoot was only a few tail-lengths away, smirking at her. The cavern was much larger than she'd thought. Not even Jaysong could have jumped up and touched the roof of it.

"Okay then," she meowed. "The good thing is that we're out of the rain. The bad thing is it's still raining, which means it's cloudy, which means there won't be any moonlight."

Ravenfoot sighed and settled down near one of the cave's stone walls, near a large, pale stone. *Is that the Moonstone*? "We got here much earlier than planned. Who's to say it won't clear up by midnight?"

She tilted her head to the side. "True."

A faint clap of thunder sounded in the distance, but Brookpaw

wasn't sure if the storm was going away, or just sounded muffled because they were underground.

Ravenfoot smiled at her. "Get some rest. You did well out there, for the most part. Next time try not to let your fear cloud your mind. Panicking is never the best option."

She sighed, thinking of her desire to run back to the ThunderClan camp after the storm began. *I can take on Willowlight, but I can't face a thunderstorm*? "Alright." Curling up on the stone floor, she fell into a dreamless sleep.

Brookpaw woke to someone gently tapping her shoulder. It was a large contrast to Berrypaw's annoying way of waking her up, which included jabbing her in the side. She'd been doing that a lot lately, and the rude awakening was usually followed by a snarky comment about coldsleep.

"Brookpaw," Ravenfoot meowed softly, "Come on, it's time."

The silver tabby opened her eyes; and immediatley regretted it. The cave was now covered in blinding silvery-white light. She had to blink quite a few times to get her eyes to adjust to it.

"*This* is the Moonstone," her mentor meowed.

Brookpaw looked up at the little hole in the ceiling and saw that a streak of moonlight was shining through it, directly onto the rock she'd seen before. *I guess it did clear up then*. The effect was dazzling. The rock now shone like a thousand diamonds, and it appeared to be even brighter than the moon.

She turned back to Ravenfoot. "This is amazing," she breathed.

"I agree. But our time left here is now short. We only have so long before the moonlight stops shining on the stone."

"What do I have to do?" Inside her anticipation was building up quickly. *I wonder who I'll talk to. Will it be someone I know, like Mistfur? What will StarClan look like?*

Ravenfoot walked over to the moonstone. "Come over here."

Brookpaw did as he asked and crouched down in front of the stone.

"Now you close your eyes and touch your nose to the stone."

It seemed a bit odd to her. "That's all?" She asked, skeptical.

Ravenfoot smirked. "What did you think you have to do? Chase your tail?"

Rolling her eyes at him, Brookpaw leaned forward and touched her nose to the stone. Energy seemed to be radiating off of it, yet it was cold to touch. Breathing in deeply, she closed her eyes.

At first it was like a dream. Things were out of focus, blurry. But then they began to take shape and become crystal clear. It was then Brookpaw realized this was much too real to be a dream.

She seemed to be in a forest. It seemed just to be a regular old woods, one that wasn't much different from the ThunderClan forest. Scenting the air, Brookpaw could smell the tantalizing scent of mouse, but also the scent of herbs and decaying wood. *Surely StarClan's a little more flashy than this?*

Although she could smell prey, Brookpaw could not smell or see any cats. *Do they realize I'm here*? Worry began to build up in her chest, but she forced it back down, remembering Ravenfoot's advice. *Panicking is never the best option*. So, she began to search. There seemed to be no trails, so at first she wandered randomly, still not daring to call out.

But as more time passed and still no cats appeared, Brookpaw knew she had to do something.

"Hello?" She called out. "Is anyone here?"

She waited for a moment. A cardinal stopped singing at the sound of her voice, but other than that, there was no indication that she had been heard. Just as she was about to give up and try to wake herself up, Brookpaw was tackled by something.

She hissed and clawed at her attacker, taking note that whatever it was had orange-yellow fur. *A fox?* Surely not. Quickly she realized that this was a cat. She chomped down on her attacker's forepaw, and he let out a screech that made her ear's ring. *Was that really necessary*? She thought grumpily as the cat stopped fighting her and began licking his bleeding paw.

Can cats get hurt in StarClan?

"What was that for?" The orange tom hissed.

Before she let out her retort, Brookpaw inspected the strange cat. He was lean, but fit. His eyes were a harsh shade of yellow, and he had a white-tipped tail. Like a fox's tail... He looked familiar somehow, but she couldn't figure out why.

"You're one to talk. Why did you attack me?"

The tom gave her a look. "You can't trust cats in these parts."

"And do 'these parts' have a name?"

"No."

Brookpaw sighed. "So I'm not in StarClan."

"What?" He meowed. "Are you dead?"

She glared at him. *What an annoying furball*. "I certainly hope not."

The tom seemed to think for a moment, then let out a curse. "Ambermoon, I swear if I see you again I'll..." He let out a long sigh.

Brookpaw gave him approximately five seconds to explain before she exclaimed, "You know, I'd really appreciate it if you bothered to explain this all to me."

"I'm not telling you about Ambermoon."

Did he just—"That's not what I mean! Where am I? Who are you?"

He sighed again. *Is that all he does*? "You're no fun. And you're nowhere."

She gave him a look with her piercing blue eyes.

"I meant that last bit. This is the place that cats who aren't good enough for StarClan but who aren't bad enough for the Dark Forest go."

Brookpaw thought for a moment. Of course, nobody had told her that there was a place for evil cats to go. All you heard about was StarClan, StarClan, StarClan. On that note, nobody had ever told her that there was a Nowhere, either. "So what's your name?"

His answer didn't surprise her. "Foxtail. And yours?"

"Brookpaw."

If Foxtail recognized her, he didn't show it. "Huh. Welcome to Nowhere, then. Have a nice day." He turned and began to walk away.

"Wait!" She called. "Why am I here?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"But-"

"Listen, Brookpaw," Foxtail spat, turning around, "If you want some sappy advice, you'd better get it from StarClan, not me." His yellow eyes glowed in the faint light.

She glowered at him and said in a quiet but menacing tone, "That's not what I want. I just want to know why StarClan sent me to *you* in the first place."

It was her turn to turn her back on him. As she stalked away, cursing under her breath, Foxtail had a silent argument playing out in his head. He would have been fine to let the apprentice walk away. Why should he care? But he knew Ambermoon would be upset with him, and would mentally scrutinize him about it for who knew how long. Sighing again, he meowed, "Wait!"

Brookpaw did not turn around, but she stopped.

"Remember this; sometimes you have to forge your own path to succeed. Even if that means leaving the path you've known behind." Every bit of him was hating himself for sounding like some StarClan cat, but he had no choice.

The silver tabby did not reply immediately, but eventually she turned her head and smirked at him in a way very similar to someone he knew. "So much for not being sappy."

Then she disappeared.

Brookpaw felt like she'd been woken up, but she wasn't back in the cave. Instead she was in yet another forest, though this one looked healthier, cleaner, and friendlier.

"Hello, dear."

She turned around to find herself face to face with a pretty long-haired red she-cat. Her gold-green eyes looked awfully similar to Hawkstar's and Brookpaw was about to ask her if she was related to him when the she-cat spoke again.

"Yes, yes, I'm related to him," she said as if she'd read her mind. "I'm Redpool, Hawkstar's mother. And also the aunt of your young friend."

Brookpaw gaped at her. "You mean Amberpaw?"

Redpool chuckled. "That's right. Firelight is my younger brother."

Amberpaw's related to Hawkstar? She sighed. *There's so much I don't know*..."You aren't the one that sent me to Foxtail, are you?"

"No, dear, I'm afraid not."

Brookpaw thought for a moment. "He mentioned a cat named Ambermoon. Do you know her?"

It was Redpool's turn to think. Her whiskers twitched, and she tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. "Not very well. Ambermoon was a WindClan queen during my time with the clans. She died of greencough after the battle of the wolves. " Her expression saddened. "I have no idea why Foxtail would know her."

"Wait, was Foxtail in ThunderClan?" Brookpaw asked, eager for answers. Maybe Redpool would tell her about the battle of the wolves.

Redpool placed her bushy tail on Brookpaw's shoulder. "Dear, I'd love to answer all of your questions, but they aren't mine to answer. Besides, our time together is very short."

The silver tabby's hopeful expression fell. "Okay. What *can* you tell me?"

Redpool's gold-green eyes sparkled. Gesturing for Brookpaw to follow her, she began padding farther into the woods.

Ahead, she heard the tinkling sound of a stream. Birds sang constantly, and the smell of prey made Brookpaw's mouth water. *StarClan is much nicer than Nowhere*. Redpool didn't stop until they reached the stream. Leaping up onto a small boulder, she waited for Brookpaw to climb up next to her.

"You were found playing in a stream when you were a kit, am I right?" Redpool asked softly.

She nodded. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"It was a sign, dear. A sign of things to come." The red she-cat sat down, glancing out across the water.

Brookpaw's thoughts spun like a spider making a web. *Is she going to give me a warning of some sort? A prophecy? Surely not*. She was just an apprentice, not a clan leader or a medicine cat.

"Look at the water, Brookpaw," Redpool told her.

The silver tabby glanced into the swirling, crystal clear water.

"Does it frighten or annoy you?"

It was an odd question. Brookpaw had never really considered it before. She'd always been quite fine with the liquid. Yet it seemed to bother most of her clanmates profusely whenever they had to cross it. *Does this mean I should have been born in RiverClan*?

She hesitated before she answered. "No, it doesn't. I've never had a problem with it. Well, except for the time I got coldsleep, but that was Slywhisker's fault."

The usual fluttering sensation she felt whenever the gray tom was mentioned took place somewhere deep in her stomach. Brookpaw mentally scowled at herself and tried to ignore it.

Redpool didn't seem to notice. She was nodding slightly, face emotionless.

"What's wrong?" Brookpaw asked her. "Is it odd I don't fear water?"

"No dear, it simply means you would've been completely comfortable living in RiverClan as well as ThunderClan. You're not the only cat who is fit for more than one clan." Redpool let out a short sigh. "You will master water, but you must remember others won't. And that others will choose not to. Be prepared for the worst. If you're not, it will lead to death and resentment."

Brookpaw stared at her. *What Foxtail told me was more sappy than this. What does it even mean*? "What do I have to be prepared for?! How?! You mean I'll cause somebody to die?!"

But her questions were in vain. Redpool's shimmering form was fading.

"Wait!" She meowed, but it was too late. The red she-cat was gone.

She woke up.

Chapter Fifteen

[image]

Her dream had left Brookpaw extremely troubled the whole trip back to the ThunderClan camp. She barely even spoke to Ravenfoot, who looked liked he wanted to ask her what was wrong, but was holding his tongue. Fallingleaf had said something about cats keeping their dreams with StarClan to themselves. *Perhaps that's why he's been so quiet*. In reality she'd been grateful that he hadn't asked, because the silver tabby did *not* want to talk about it.

The only trouble they'd run into on the way back was the soaked moor. The rain and melted snow had turned the soil into reddish mud that slipped out from under their paws on the gentle slopes. Brookpaw had been covered in so much of the sloppy red-brown stuff that she'd looked like Amberpaw. A quick wash in the very cold stream in ThunderClan territory had solved that problem, and then they'd walked back into the camp.

Most of the cats appeared fine, but apparently Twigtail had gotten sick overnight. Aspenglow still wasn't sure what was wrong. She'd taken Twigtail into the medicine den, and advised Hawkstar to send patrols out looking for any sort of dry bedding to put in the elders den. Lilystream was out leading one such patrol currently, and Ravenfoot had left the camp again to go help her.

"Hey, Brookpaw!" It was Fallingleaf. The light tabby had a scrawny mouse plopped in front of her. "You want to share?"

I don't feel like eating anything, she thought, but talking with Fallingleaf might get the awful dream out of her mind. At least for the moment. "Sure, thanks." She sat down in front of her friend, taking a bite of the mouse and trying not to gag.

"So how'd it go?" Fallingleaf asked, green eyes sparkling.

"Fine," Brookpaw lied, "The Moonstone was amazing."

The light tabby nodded in agreement. "I told you it would be. But I suppose you don't truly get it until you see it for yourself. Unfortunately, my first trip was sort of ruined by Sageclaw. I guess she was just really grumpy that evening. Every once in a while she is..."

Brookpaw gave Fallingleaf a look. "You didn't tell me that before. That must've been fun."

Taking another bite of the mouse, Fallingleaf nodded. Brookpaw was about to ask her if she'd seen Amberpaw today when suddenly the tabby's ears perked up and she stopped chewing like she'd seen a spirit. Brookpaw felt an unfamiliar presence somewhere behind her and turned to see a young long-haired black tom with a white stomach strolling into the camp. Instantly her and Fallingleaf's hackles were raised and the two she-cats had begun to run at the stranger when Leafpaw tackled him.

Brookpaw had to admit the calico's technique was very smooth. She'd soared through the air and landed so that her forepaws were squarely on the tom's shoulders, while her haunches were still free in case he would try to jump up. It looked as if the black cat had had the breath knocked out of him. He made no struggle to get up.

Briefly she thought of the black cat from her dream. *Is this him*? Almost as soon as she'd thought of it she dismissed the idea. The cat from her dreams was older, had blue eyes, not yellow ones, and only had a white chest.

"What are you doing here?!" Leafpaw hissed at the tom.

By now all the cats in the camp had come out to see what was going on. Hawkstar was walking towards Leafpaw and the tom, looking calm and authoritative. His whiskers were twitching humorously as he watched, the only thing betraying his stern expression.

Brookpaw could smell the fear scent on the tom as Leafpaw glared at him. And she couldn't exactly blame him. The calico looked awfully fierce, with her unrelenting green gaze, bared fangs, and missing ear. Fallingleaf looked over at Brookpaw and shrugged

as the tom didn't answer.

Out of the corner of her eye Brookpaw saw Lilystream, Ravenfoot, Grasscloud, and Amberpaw slip back into camp. Catching her gaze, Amberpaw gave Brookpaw a *what's going on?* look. She shook her head, gesturing for him to watch.

"I said what are you doing here?" Leafpaw growled.

Snowblaze stepped forward like he wanted to deal with the cat himself, but Hawkstar signaled with his tail for him to stop.

At long last, the tom finally spoke. "I'm sorry, I just-"

"Don't apologize," Leafpaw told him, a little more gently, "just tell me why you're here."

His yellow eyes widened and he stared at the calico she-cat for a few seconds. Then he meowed, "I'm looking for a home."

Instantly the clan cats started whispering and gossiping to each other.

"He looks like a kittypet," Berrypaw hissed under her breath to Rabbitflight.

He nodded. "What makes him think we'd help him?"

Brookpaw pinned her ears back at the comments and wondered not for the first time what she'd done to wrong Rabbitflight. Beside her Fallingleaf seemed to sense what she was feeling.

"Ignore them," she whispered, "they're just being mouse-brains."

You think I don't know that? Sighing, she shoved the thought away. Fallingleaf was just trying to be kind.

Hawkstar approached the tom, beckoning for Leafpaw to let him up. The clan leader whispered something to her and she nodded, standing beside him as the tom jumped nervously to his feet.

"What happened to you?" Hawkstar asked him calmly. "You smell faintly of Twolegplace, but you also smell like you've been in the forest for a while. Are you a rogue?"

The tom shook his head. "No."

Brookpaw saw Berrypaw smirk.

"I- I used to live with twolegs."

A few of the clan cats scowled, but Hawkstar ignored them, placing his tail on the tom's shoulders comfortingly. "Used to? What happened?"

"They moved away. They left me." The young cat looked heartbroken. Although she'd never want to live with twolegs, Brookpaw couldn't help but to feel sorry for him. He looked so scared, so lost...no cat that young should have to go through what he obviously had.

Leafpaw spoke up again. "So you tried to look after yourself, didn't you? You tried to survive in the woods, but didn't have the skills you needed. So you came here. How did you hear about us?"

The tom's expression became bitter. "I overheard some stupid rogues saying that there were cats living in the forest. Wild cats. They wouldn't help me, so I tried to find you guys, to see if you were real. To see if you would help me..." His yellow eyes were wide. "Will you?"

For once, the cats were silent. All eyes were on Hawkstar. The clan leader took a deep breath, giving the young cat a small smile. "What's your name?"

"Minnie."

"Well, Leafpaw, what should we do with Minnie?" Hawkstar turned to the calico, a slightly humorous expression upon his face.

Leafpaw appeared to think for a moment, then meowed, "Well, if he's willing to learn and respect our ways, I believe we should help him. Clan cats should never turn away a cat in need."

A few of the cats seemed angered by this.

"But he'll just be another mouth to feed!" Rabbitflight meowed. "Can we really expect him to change from his kittypet ways?"

Berrypaw looked like she agreed with him, but didn't want to speak out against her sister. Brookpaw supposed she could respect the red tabby for that.

"Then why don't we do this?" Emberheart meowed.

All eyes fell on the deputy.

"We let Minnie stay with us for a moon. During that time we'll teach him the ways of clan life. If he proves himself to be worthy of ThunderClan, we let him stay. If not, we find him a suitable place to live outside of the clan territories."

Minnie glanced around at the cats, a pleading look on his face. Leafpaw stood next to him, waiting for their answer.

"That sounds reasonable," Stormclaw meowed.

Jaysong nodded in agreement. "It'll be nice to have another young cat around."

One by one, all the cats began to agree with the deputy. The last to speak up was Minkpelt. The she-cat waved her bushy tail back and forth, and Brookpaw was suddenly struck by how much she looked like Redpool.

"Training Minnie will help ThunderClan out," she meowed, "Especially considering we have no new kits on the way."

Hawkstar dipped his head to his sister and turned to face Minnie. "Then it shall be so." The leader then jumped agilely up the top of Highrock, his gold-green eye shining.

Minnie stared up at him in awe. Hawkstar *could* be extremely impressive when he wanted to be.

"Minnie, we welcome you into ThunderClan. Try your best, and

you may be able to stay."

The black tom nodded.

"The first step in becoming an apprentice is receiving a name. I realize you already have one, but it is not a suitable clan name. From now on you will be known as Nightpaw. Applefall, you've mentored before. Use your experience and patience to help Nightpaw adapt to clan life."

Brookpaw thought she saw a glimmer of something in Hawkstar's eye, but it was gone as quick as it had come. She watched as Applefall strode up to the young cat, and touched her nose to his, gently telling him something under her breath.

Nightpaw flinched as their noses touched, but he looked relieved as the golden tabby finished speaking. Brookpaw couldn't help but to smile. *I wonder how it would be to have her as a mentor*. Well, she had come as close to that as she possibly could, considering Applefall had mentored Ravenfoot.

"I have something else to announce as well," Hawkstar meowed. "Leafpaw, Berrypaw, come forward."

Fallingleaf gasped. "They passed the rest of their assessments today, but I didn't think he'd make them warriors so soon..."

Brookpaw felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. Berrypaw was about to be made into a warrior. That would only make her attitude even snottier than before. The feeling worsened as she watched Berrypaw stride towards Highrock, head high and smirking. Aspenglow rolled her eyes as the apprentice passed her.

When Berrypaw had finished showing off and was standing next to her sister, Hawkstar began. "Leafpaw, your loyalty and ability to tell wrong from right are treasured abilities in this clan. You have trained well and proven yourself worthy of the honor that becoming a warrior is. Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend your clan at all costs?"

"I do."

"Then from this moment forward, you will be known as Leafstorm."

Among the crowd of cats, Brookpaw saw Sageclaw gazing at her daughter's proudly. She'd never seen the usually serious she-cat look so happy, and wondered vaguely if Sageclaw's body would go into shock after such a large burst of happiness.

"Berrypaw."

Brookpaw brought her eyes back to Hawkstar. *Please name her Berryflower. Please name her Berryflower...* The red tabby would probably spit up a hairball at the idea of being named something so sweet and innocent as *Berryflower*.

"Although there have been a few times I doubted your abilities-"

She thought back to the time when she and Berrypaw were kits, the day she'd clawed at the red tabby's stomach. Brookpaw smiled.

"—you really have proven yourself in the last few moons. You're fighting skills are ones to be admired, and your courage is as well. Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend this clan, even if it costs you your life?"

"Yes, Hawkstar."

"Then you shall be known as Berryfang."

Mouse dung.

"It is my honor to welcome you both as full warriors of ThunderClan," Hawkstar meowed before jumping down from the Highrock to rest his muzzle upon the two she-cat heads respectfully and to wish them luck on their vigil.

"Leafstorm! Berryfang!" The clan cheered.

Nightpaw watched, fascinated, while Applefall tried to explain it all to him. No doubt she'd be taking him on a tour of the territory tomorrow. *Well, maybe not. It might be better to teach him about daily clan life before taking him out on the territory*. Applefall would take

good care of him.

Brookpaw made her way over to her mother and the young cat, wanting to welcome ThunderClan's new apprentice. Nightpaw spun around as she got closer, looking a little nervous to see her coming over. *At least he's alert.*

"Hi," she told him kindly, "I'm glad you could join us."

Applefall smiled at her, but Nightpaw still looked nervous. No, not nervous. Defensive. *Of course he would be*, she thought, *he must have noticed some of the cats snotty attitudes towards kittypets*.

"This is my daughter, Nightpaw," Applefall told him gently. "She doesn't mind you being here."

The black tom relaxed a little bit. Just a little bit. "What's your name?" He asked her.

"Brookpaw."

He squinted his yellow eyes and turned to Applefall. "Brookpaw? Do all the apprentices have the same ending to their name?"

Applefall nodded. "When a kitten is first born, their mother gives then a name, like Brook. Because that cat is a kitten, their name becomes Brookkit. When that kit becomes an apprentice when they are six moons old, their name becomes Brookpaw. And finally, when that apprentice becomes a warrior, they receive their warrior name. There are several different endings for a warrior name."

Brookpaw watched as Nightpaw began to smile. "I think I get it."

I do hope he adapts to clan life. She hated the idea of sending him back out into the wild alone. Then she remembered what he'd said about the rogues, and wondered if they were the same ones that kept trespassing on the clan territory. The silver tabby desperately wanted to ask Nightpaw about them, but figured she should let him get settled in before prodding him for answers. She sighed.

"Brookpaw!"

It was Emberheart.

She turned as the deputy walked up to her, Rabbitflight following her. *Great, why is he here*? "Yes?"

"I want you two to go hunting for the evening," the dark tabby meowed, "The fresh-kill pile is thinning out, and it's getting harder and harder to refill it. It wouldn't hurt to have some more cats out hunting."

The sinking feeling in Brookpaw's stomach returned. Things had gotten so awkward between her and Rabbitflight. Was that why Emberheart had chosen them? She glanced up at the white and ginger tom, but he had directed his yellow gaze towards the ground.

"Um, okay Emberheart," she meowed. "We'll get going."

The deputy seemed to have picked up the hesitancy in her voice and was looking at her curiously. "Is there a problem with this?"

"No, Emberheart," Rabbitflight meowed, much more convincingly than she'd done, "It's fine." He walked out ahead of Brookpaw and made for the gorse tunnel. The silver tabby followed, aware that Berryfang was staring her down as they passed her. *Oh, calm down, Berryflower. I'm sure he's about as happy as I am about this*.

Indeed the sinking feeling hadn't left her stomach, and a sense of dread had come over her. Would Rabbitflight even talk to her? Or would they be doing this whole awkward silence thing the whole way? Brookpaw was careful not to let her tail get tangled in the gorse as they exited the tunnel. She really didn't want to go through that again.

Ahead of her, Rabbitflight seemed unusually dull and quiet. He plodded through the half-melted snow, not looking back or even acknowledging her presence. *What did I do?*

Brookpaw waited until they were a good distance from the camp before she finally asked the question.

"What did I do, Rabbitflight?"

The ginger and white tom stopped, still not looking back.

"Rabbitflight?"

He sighed. "Nothing."

Brookpaw's blue eyes narrowed. She circled around him until she was looking Rabbitflight straight in the eyes. "Don't you *dare* say that. If I'd done nothing to you, you wouldn't be hanging out with Berryfang and ignoring me all the time. So tell me; what did I do?"

At long last, her former friend looked up at her. "You didn't do anything, Brookpaw. I did."

Her thoughts swirled. What did he mean?

Rabbitflight sighed again and sat down on his haunches, fixing her with his yellow gaze. "Listen, it started a long time ago, okay? You and Fallingleaf were my best friends. You don't know how much that meant to me. Snowblaze has never really treated me like his son, and my mother died giving birth to me. I think he blames me for her death. So it wasn't like I was very close to anyone, maybe besides Mistfur, until I met you guys."

Brookpaw knew what it was like to only have one parent, but she couldn't imagine what it must be like to have that one parent deny your existence. She had her issues with Applefall, but she and her mother loved each other just the same. She looked back up at Rabbitflight, new found sympathy in her eyes.

"Of course you guys teased me and such, but that's what friends do, right?"

She nodded.

"Fallingleaf had messed with me from the day she became an apprentice. And you messed with me from the day you were old enough to roam around the camp. But it somehow felt different with you. I don't know why. Later on, after Mistfur died, I realized I liked you as maybe a little more than a friend. But I knew you didn't like me in that way, so I hid it. I didn't want to force you to

like me."

Her eyes widened a little.

Rabbitflight continued on, looking at her every once in a while. "But I was bad at hiding it, Brookpaw. I got cranky, irritable. I didn't *want* to hide it. But I had to. So, even though I hated it, I forced myself to hang out with somebody else. I even had to ditch Fallingleaf too, just for it to look convincing..." He trailed off. "And eventually it worked. I don't hate you, but I don't feel the same way about you as I did before. I was just afraid you'd be mad at me for ditching you, so I just continued to hang out with Berryfang. Despite how she is with you, she's not the worst cat in the world, believe it or not..."

"It's amazing how Berryfang changes lives, isn't it?" She asked, the slightest hint of a smile on her face.

Rabbitflight looked stunned. "So you forgive me?"

"I do," she meowed. "I can't say I ever had those feelings for you, but I'd gladly take you back as my friend."

The ginger and white tom grinned that crazy grin of his and rubbed his head against her shoulder. "Thank you," he purred.

"Just don't ditch, Berryfang, okay? You don't need to make that mistake again."

Rabbitflight pulled back and nodded.

"Besides, I don't need another reason for her to hate me," Brookpaw added.

"Understood."

They returned to camp just before dark. Brookpaw had managed to catch a cardinal and a squirrel, while Rabbitflight had managed to catch his namesake, a rabbit. Emberheart gave them an approving nod as they entered the camp, and Brookpaw couldn't help but to

smile. *I still may not know who my father is, or why Applefall won't talk about him, but at least I've got a friend back*. She was acutely aware of Berryfang's yellow eyes boring into the back of her head as she and Rabbitflight entered the camp, and wondered if it was possible that the red tabby liked Rabbitflight.

"Well done, you two," Ravenfoot meowed, appearing, as usual, out of nowhere.

Brookpaw nodded her thanks and walked over to drop her catches in the fresh-kill pile. Although it was nearly dark, a great deal of the ThunderClan cats were still out. Grasscloud and Jaysong had gone over to visit the elders, and were chatting away with Shalefire and Duskpelt. The silver tabby wondered if they were enjoying the new bedding Lilystream and her patrol had brought them. *That must have been tough*, she thought, *finding all that moss beneath the snow*.

Amberpaw was having a quiet conversation with Firelight. Nearby, Emberheart was grooming herself, looking up at the two toms every once in a while, then continuing to groom herself. *I wonder what that's about.*

Deciding she'd had enough for a day, Brookpaw made her way into the apprentices den, noticing that Nightpaw was nowhere to be seen, and curled up in her nest and fell into a dreamless sleep.

"No! She can't be dead!"

Brookpaw woke with a start, wondering for a brief moment where Leafstorm and Berryfang were. Then she realized they were warriors now and would be in the warriors den. Amberpaw was up as well. Glancing at each other briefly, they rushed outside and easily found the source of commotion.

Jaysong had been the one who'd yowled. She, Mapleclaw, Emberheart, and Dustscar were huddled outside the medicine den, facing Aspenglow in the entrance, who looked tired and grim.

"What's going on?" Hawkstar meowed as he strolled up to the others, but the look on his face said he knew exactly what had happened.

Brookpaw turned to Amberpaw. "Oh StarClan, it's Twigtail, isn't it? She's dead."

The yellow-orange eyes widened.

Aspenglow made her way out through the growing crowd of cats to address Hawkstar, not even trying to stop Jaysong from rushing into the medicine den to confirm that the elderly she-cat was dead. "Twigtail died. Sometime in the night, probably, as she's dead cold." Her green eyes fell to the ground. "If I'd realized how sick she really was, this might not have happened..."

"Don't," Hawkstar told her. "Don't blame yourself for this. If it was her time to join StarClan, than there was nothing you could have possibly done about it."

Out of the corner of her eye, Brookpaw spotted Applefall, Nightpaw right beside her, looking sad but proud of her leader. That suspicious feeling that her mother liked Hawkstar returned, but the silver tabby could hardly blame her. Hawkstar was a great cat. *But does that mean my father was too?*

Jaysong let out another wail from inside the den, and Aspenglow's face fell again.

"We should hold an early vigil for her!" Dustscar rasped.

Everyone turned to him, waiting for an explanation.

"It feels like snow is on the way. I can feel it in my bones," he continued. "Twigtail hated snow, and I doubt that she would want to be buried in a snowstorm."

From outside the elders den, Shalefire and Duskpelt were nodding. "We agree. She was always complaining about the snow, and how she wished new-leaf would come sooner."

Hawkstar tilted his head, considering the suggestion. Then he

too nodded. "Very well."

Mapleclaw and Jaysong had brought Twigtail's body out from the den and laid it gently under the Highrock. For the whole day cats came by to groom her tabby pelt one last time, or to wish her luck in StarClan. Brookpaw herself was at a loss for what to say. She'd been around Twigtail when she'd listened to Duskpelt's stories, but she'd never really gotten to know her.

"You were a great mentor," Jaysong whispered to the tabby she-cat. "I'll never forget you." She touched her nose to Twigtail's cold shoulder and finally walked away, tail drooping and head lowered. *So that's why Jaysong had been so grieved*. Brookpaw tried to imagine how it would be to lose Ravenfoot, and realized how much she'd miss his dry comments and his sneaking around everywhere.

"I never really got to know you well, but I hope you find peace in StarClan," she told Twigtail softly, and dipped her head to the corpse respectfully. She then stepped back to let Amberpaw, who'd been closer to the she-cat than herself, say his last words to the tabby.

The elders went off to bury Twigtail in the evening. When they returned, it began to snow.

Chapter Sixteen

[image]

"The days in ThunderClan have been cold, snowy, and nearly preyless."

That about sums it up, Brookpaw thought. She continued to watch as Hawkstar addressed the clans. The Gathering had come up again, and it was Amberpaw's first. Currently he was pressed up against her, trying to keep warm.

It was awfully cold out, and like Hawkstar had said, it had been this way for days now. Snow was falling almost every other day, and prey had become scarcer and scarcer. The ThunderClan cats were scared for a repeat of the previous leaf-bare, when the clan had nearly starved.

"We've also had signs of rogues around our borders, and have been increasing patrols to help keep them away," Hawkstar continued, "and we have two new warriors. Leafstorm and Berryfang."

"*Leafstorm*! *Berryfang*!" For whatever reason, the ShadowClan cats seemed to be yowling the two she-cats names nearly as loud as ThunderClan was. Berryfang, of course, looked proud and smug, as usual. She'd held her head high as the cats cheered her name, taking it all in and converting it into a huge smirk.

"And we have one new apprentice; Amberpaw."

The cheering wasn't as loud, but it was loud enough for Amberpaw to duck his head in embarrassment.

Finished, Hawkstar dipped his head to Copperstar, who stepped forward to babble on about how ShadowClan was doing well despite the bad weather.

"Hey."

Brookpaw turned her head and saw Breezepaw behind her, grinning. She smiled and gave the orange tabby an *I'll talk with you later* look. Breezepaw nodded and looked up to watch her leader.

"We've encountered a few more rogues than usual along one of our borders," Copperstar meowed, "but Redface lead a successful patrol to deal with them, and I dare say they won't be coming back anytime soon."

Brookpaw looked up at the scar-faced ShadowClan deputy, wondering not for the first time why he looked so familiar.

Copperstar had been the last leader to speak, so as he finished his speech the cats disbanded and began to chat and socialize with each other.

Breezepaw pranced up to her, grinning. "What's up? I heard you've been taking down RiverClan warriors."

Brookpaw's eyes narrowed at her friend. "I didn't try to kill her."

"No, I didn't mean it like that!" The orange tabby looked around, as if checking to see if anybody was watching them. "In fact, it's probably a good thing you took her out. Willowlight was *messed up*."

"How did you know?"

"I saw her at my first gathering. She interrupted Crowstar mid-speech and tried to tell us all that RiverClan would shred anyone who crossed over their borders. I think she thought that having her brother as a clan leader gave her some sort of right to command other cats around. Finally some gray RiverClan tom got her to shut up, but sat you could probably guess, things were a little awkward after that."

Brookpaw grimaced. "I bet." Her thoughts went back to the words gray RiverClan tom. Could that be Slywhisker? Was he here tonight? Almost subconsciously she began glancing around at the other cats, looking for a pair of silvery eyes.

"If you're looking for your friend," Breezepaw meowed, "he's right

over there." She gestured at Amberpaw, who was chatting with the RiverClan apprentice who'd been looking after Crowstar's kits the day before she got pushed in the river, Violetpaw. "And don't try to deny it, I saw you two leaning on each other while the leaders were talking."

The silver tabby rolled her eyes. "Like you said, he's just my best friend. You wanna meet him?"

Breezepaw smirked. "No, he's busy talking to Violetpaw. We should go see if Swiftpaw is here."

"He was here last time. I noticed you weren't."

"How thoughtful of you, Brookpaw."

They searched all through the WindClan cats, but Swiftpaw was nowhere to be seen. At last they gave up, deciding that he hadn't come.

"It's odd that he didn't come," Breezepaw said, "considering Egretflight is here."

Brookpaw swatted her friend's ear. "Will you stop? Your comments are only gonna make his and mine worse when you find someone you like."

"Who says I'm ever going to like someone?"

"Me."

Both of the she-cats jumped as an all too familiar meow came from behind them. Brookpaw cursed her bad luck as soon as her mind processed exactly who it was.

"Sorry dears," Slywhisker said in his velvety voice, "but it's typical for adolescent cats like you to have at least someone they don't think is half bad." He smirked. "Even you, Breezepaw."

Breezepaw's eyes narrowed. "Slywhisker, am I right?"

"The one and only."

"You're that cat who got Willowlight to shut up at the gathering she decided to make an announcement at, aren't you?"

Slywhisker nodded, his silvery eyes gleaming.

"Not to mention he's one of the cats who fought for her when Willowlight decided to attack us," Brookpaw added. For some reason she did not mention the time when he pushed her in the river.

The gray tom smirked. "Bitter, Brookpaw? This is a gathering, not a time to be bringing up old grudges."

"I'd hardly call it old-"

"That's enough, both of you." Crowstar had joined the conversation. "This is indeed a gathering, and we don't need to have any quarreling."

You're one to talk, Brookpaw nearly spat, but held her tongue. Crowstar could be a jerk sometimes, but he was a clan leader, nonetheless. Getting into a fight with him wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Sorry, Crowstar," she dipped her head to him. "We'll just be going then." The silver tabby gestured for Breezepaw to follow her, and then she melted into the crowd of cats. Once they'do gotten away from RiverClan, Breezepaw turned to face her.

"What was that about?" She asked, her yellow eyes glinting with something Brookpaw couldn't identify.

"What? I fought him when Willowlight attacked us."

"Yeah, I got that much, but..."

Brookpaw narrowed her eyes at her friend. "But what?"

Tail twitching, the orange tabby sighed. "Seriously, it's nothing. Come on, introduce me to Amberpaw or something."

She had the feeling Breezepaw was hiding something from her, but

Brookpaw decided to ignore it. "Fine. Let's go find him."

It didn't take long. They found the reddish apprentice sitting near Snowblaze and Ravenfoot, listening to them tell what Brookpaw presumed was a story. She managed to get his attention by clawing a small amount of snow into her curled paw and tossing it at him. He turned around as if to tell her off, then, realizing who it was, snuck away from his mentor and joined them.

"Was that really necessary?" Amberpaw asked the silver tabby.

"Of course."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say."

Breezepaw smirked a little.

"Amberpaw, this is Breezepaw. I met her at my first gathering," Brookpaw said, looking from her him to the orange tabby.

"Hi," he meowed.

"Hullo. Welcome to the gang," Breezepaw told him, still smirking.

Amberpaw looked at the two she-cats. "Who else is in this gang of yours?"

"Swiftpaw. He's in WindClan, but he isn't here tonight," Brookpaw replied.

"Should I be grateful or sad that he isn't?" The reddish tom asked, smirking just a little bit.

Breezepaw returned the smirk and placed her tail on Amberpaw's shoulder. "You aren't half bad."

Just as Brookpaw was about to say something, Ravenfoot came over to them and meowed, "Come on Brookpaw, Amberpaw. We're going back to camp."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "It's still pretty early to be leaving."

"Hawkstar's orders. Rumor has it that he just had a vision."

Breezepaw rolled her eyes. "What, of you guys leaving the gathering?"

Ravenfoot turned on her, expression deadly serious. "No. Something far worse than that." The black-footed tom waited until the apprentice dropped her doubtful look, then gestured for Brookpaw and Amberpaw to follow him.

I wonder if he knows what Hawkstar saw. Brookpaw mouthed the word *goodbye* to Breezepaw and trailed after her mentor. Once they were out of earshot of most of the cats, she spoke up again. "How bad was it? Or don't you know?"

Ravenfoot shook his head. "I don't know anything except that it was bad. Hawkstar didn't want to make a big deal about it by announcing that we were leaving to the other cats."

"The other clans will be curious whether we leave unannounced or not," Amberpaw pointed out. "Why make them suspicious by doing this?"

"It might look suspicious," Ravenfoot replied, "but it will put off the questions for a while. I do believe Hawkstar told the other clan leaders that we were going."

Brookpaw saw Amberpaw's orange-yellow eyes dull ever so slightly. So she placed her tail on his shoulder reassuringly before slinking into the brush, back towards camp.

She woke groggily the next morning to Berryfang jabbing her paw in her rib cage.

"Wake up, *Brookfrost*, you're supposed to be patrolling." The red tabby's face twisted into a smirk.

Brookpaw pulled herself up, stretching. "With who?"

"Me."

Great. Just great. "Alright, I'm coming." She stepped out after the red tabby, silently cursing her name. Had Berryfang been chosen to put together a patrol? If so, why had she picked her, or all cats? *Probably just to torture me,* the silver tabby thought, sighing slightly.

"Who else is coming?" She asked Berryfang as they padded out into the snow-covered ravine.

"Leafstorm."

"And that's it?"

"Yeah. Hawkstar's making the patrols smaller so more cats can focus on hunting for the clan. Didn't you know? Oh, that's right, you're still an apprentice." Berryfang smirked at her.

Oh, how I would love to shred her ears right now, Brookpaw thought darkly.

At least she wouldn't be alone with Berryfang. Leafstorm was a reasonable cat, and a friend of hers. Having the calico around might make things a little better between her and Berryfang. At least, a little better.

"Hello everyone," said someone in a dramatic voice. "Shall we get this patrol started?"

Berryfang rolled her eyes but smiled. "I'm the one who's supposed to be leading this patrol, dear sister." She swatted Leafstorm's remaining ear as the calico joined them.

"Where are we going then, oh wise one?" Leafstorm replied, smirking.

Brookpaw couldn't help but to smile. She herself may not get along with Berryfang, but it was nice to see that someone could.

The red tabby sat up and puffed out her chest. "The ShadowClan border. Now let's get moving before Hawkstar comes over here and tells us to get lost. And yes, that includes you too, Brookpaw."

The silver tabby rolled her eyes, and Leafstorm gave her an

apologetic smile. *It's not* your *fault,* Brookpaw thought, and ran to catch up with Berryfang, who was already bounding into the gorse tunnel.

One by one they squeezed through the tunnel, emerging into the winter wonderland that was the ThunderClan forest. *It's beautiful out here, but why does it have to be so cold*? The silver tabby involuntarily shivered.

"Aw, you cold Brookfrost?" Berryfang asked her. "We could find a river for you to fall into, if that would help."

Brookpaw ignored her and kept walking, trying to focus on the trail ahead.

"Didn't you hear me?" The red tabby meowed, still smirking.

Still Brookpaw ignored her.

"Answer me, apprentice, I am leading this patrol after all."

"Berryfang—" Leafstorm began.

The silver tabby stopped her before she could say anything else. "Just because you're leading a patrol doesn't give you the right to constantly ridicule and belittle me," she said cooly, trying to suppress her anger. Fighting would get them nowhere. Their first battle as kits had proven that.

At first, Berryfang didn't seem to know what to say. Leafstorm glanced back and forth between the two she-cats, prepared to intercept whoever attacked first.

"Maybe I should tell Hawkstar that you need an extra moon or two as an apprentice, since you obviously can't take criticism, or orders, well," the red tabby hissed, eyes gleaming.

Leafstorm glared at her sister. "You'll do no such thing. You *are* being a bit of a mouse-brain. We're out here to patrol, not fight each other."

Berryfang sniffed. "Wow, my own sister siding with a little

apprentice. That's something I never saw coming." She swished her tail through the air. "I guess I'll have to patrol by myself, considering neither of you seem very willing to come."

And with that said, the red tabby marched away from them, in the direction of the ShadowClan border.

"What happened to make her that cranky?" Brookpaw said to Leafstorm.

The calico sighed. "I have no idea. She's been that way for the past few days. You'd think I'd be able to tell what was wrong, considering I'm her sister...yet reading emotions doesn't seem to be one of my talents..."

"Don't say that," Brookpaw meowed, "you saw that Nightpaw was scared after you tackled him, and you eased up on him. Berryfang's a hard cat to read, and trust me, after all this fighting with her, I know."

Leafstorm smiled. "Thanks Brookpaw. Now tell me, should we go find her? Or let her settle down on her own?"

The silver tabby had no idea what to do, to be honest. Would it be better to let Berryfang cool down alone, or go find her before she got herself into trouble just because she was feeling spiteful? Thankfully, she never had to answer that question. Both her and Leafstorm's thoughts were broken by the sound of a cat—Berryfang—screeching.

"Berryfang!" The calico yowled, and sped off in the direction the red tabby had gone. Brookpaw followed close behind her, hoping that Berryfang had just found a rogue on their territory, and was scaring it off. But the silver tabby doubted that was true—there had been pain in that screech. And fear. Something Berryfang was not known to have most of the time.

As soon as they spotted her, Brookpaw wished she was still back in the camp, earlier that morning. Maybe if she'd never gone on a patrol, this would have never happened.

Berryfang's red tabby pelt was being stained by blood as it ran from two very large and ugly looking wounds that crossed her left shoulder and throat.

"Berryfang?!" Leafstorm half cried, half whispered as she ran up to her sister.

Brookpaw didn't have to get close to the she-cat to know that she was dying. The thought hit her like one of the monsters that ran along the Thunderpath. Even if Berryfang had been her rival, she was still a clanmate.

"I need you to promise me something," the red tabby told Leafstorm, coughing up blood.

"Yes?"

"If you ever get the chance...slit Siltpelt's throat." Berryfang coughed again.

"He did this?" Brookpaw asked, approaching the wounded she-cat warily.

Berryfang's dulling eyes glanced over at her. "That's right. And you p-promise me something too, Brookfrost. You stay quiet if Siltpelt does suddenly appear in the Dark Forest. You g-got that?"

Brookpaw nodded. "I do. Don't boss our ancestors around too much, okay?"

The red tabby's last bit of dislike went into the stare that she gave Brookpaw. "Don't tell me what to do, *Brookfrost*."

And she stopped breathing.

Leafstorm let out an ear-splitting yowl and buried her face into her sister's fur. Brookpaw felt sick, which she knew would have made Berryfang feel happy.

Two cats had already died this winter. How many more would go before it was over?

If there was one difference between Twigtail's death and Berryfang's it was the amount of shock ThunderClan felt. Although no one had wanted to see Twigtail go, she had been fairly old, and prone to getting sick. Berryfang? No one had expected to see her go. Especially Leafstorm.

After sitting with Berryfang's body till another patrol found them, Brookpaw and the calico (not to mention Snowblaze, Amberpaw, and Jaysong) had hauled the now late she-cat back to the camp. The cats had mourned for the rest of the day, and buried Berryfang the following morning. It had been a difficult task, as the ground was becoming harder and harder to penetrate as the weather continued to get colder.

The following days had been slow and somber, but still hunting and border patrols had to be put together. Several of the cats wanted to attack ShadowClan to avenge Berryfang, but Hawkstar had ruled against it, saying it would only make things worse at the moment. Personally Brookpaw agreed with him. Now was not the time to be starting a war. They could barely catch enough prey to feed the clan. If several of the cats were off attacking ShadowClan, nothing would get done back at the camp, and the clan would starve to death. Even she could see that.

"Fallingleaf, lead a hunting patrol over near Tallpines," Emberheart told the light tabby, "take Ravenfoot, Brookpaw, Snowblaze, and Amberpaw with you. Make sure you don't run into Applefall's border patrol."

"Understood," Fallingleaf replied, and went off to gather the cats who were supposed to be in her patrol.

Brookpaw started walking over to her. She'd been sitting outside the apprentices' den, and had heard everything.

"Great, you're already here!" Fallingleaf meowed cheerfully. How she could pull off being happy, Brookpaw had not idea, but admired her friend for being able to do so. It was a nice change from the depressing atmosphere of the camp right now.

Brookpaw managed a weak smile. "I believe Ravenfoot went to talk to Lilystream. I can go get him, if you want."

"That'd be great! I'll go find Snowblaze and Amberpaw and meet you back here."

They both sped off—Brookpaw towards the nursery, Fallingleaf towards the warriors den. Approaching the nursery entrance, the silver tabby peaked her head in.

Lilystream was curled up inside along with Grasscloud, and both were sleeping. Slightly jealous, Brookpaw was about to turn away when she spotted Ravenfoot directly behind her.

"How do you always do that?" She exclaimed, shivering slightly.

Her mentor smirked. "I believe we are supposed to be heading out on a hunting patrol."

"And I believe I was supposed to be looking for you," she replied. "And now I found you. Come on then."

She strutted past the black-footed tom back towards where Fallingleaf was sitting, chatting with Snowblaze and Amberpaw.

"You found him! Great," Fallingleaf meowed, "let's get going then."

Brookpaw caught Amberpaw's eye. He smiled slightly and gestured to Fallingleaf, *she's cheery*.

She nodded. *That's not a bad thing*.

The five cats exited the camp and emerged into the woods.

"I was thinking we could split up," Fallingleaf said, scenting the air. "We'd cover more ground that way. Amberpaw, go with Brookpaw over to near the Twolegplace border. You never know what you might find there."

Hmm, perhaps one of those rogues we keep seeing? Brookpaw thought, but kept her mouth shut. She nodded to Amberpaw and they took off at a steady pace, not fast enough to wear them out, but not too

slow so that they never reached their destination within good time.

"Dear StarClan, it's cold," Amberpaw hissed when the breeze started to pick up.

"You'll scare all the prey away if you don't stop complaining," Brookpaw told him quietly.

Her friend smiled and shut up.

After several minutes of trodding through the snow, they reached the border. By that time Brookpaw felt like icicles were starting to form on her whiskers. *Will I even be able to scent for prey*? She wondered.

"Hey Brookpaw, come here," Amberpaw meowed. He was standing right on the scent line, which was the one thing strong enough that she could smell it.

"What?" She asked as she padded over to him.

The reddish tom looked up at her with his big orange eyes. "I think another rogue came through here again."

Brookpaw took in a deep breath, and, sure enough, there was just a snippet of unfamiliar scent. How had her friend found it so quickly? She couldn't help but to smile. Amberpaw was going to be the best hunter in the clan someday.

"You're right," she told him, "good job finding that. I never would have."

Amberpaw looked away in embarrassment. "Do you think all these sightings and scents are the same cat?"

"I doubt it. One cat would be dumb to just keep showing up on our territory. But I do think they're connected, somehow."

But how I'll ever convince the others of that, I have no idea.

Her friend nodded. "Me too."

They were silent for a moment, and the only sound that could be heard was the chilly breeze blowing through the barren treetops. Once again Amberpaw shivered.

"Come on," he meowed, "Emberheart will kill us if we come back to camp with no fresh-kill."

Giving the border one final look over, Brookpaw turned and followed her friend back into the heart of the forest.

Chapter Seventeen

[image] [image]

"No Brookpaw, you were too slow. Come on, Amberpaw's picking up on this quicker than you are, and you have three and a half more moons of training." Emberheart's cold words seemed at home piercing the icy air.

Only the deputy would make them climb trees in this weather. It was awful out. The cold penetrated even Brookpaw's pelt, and the howling wind whipped snow into their eyes and ears. Thankfully she wasn't having them climb too high, as that would have been too dangerous, but it was still challenging.

Brookpaw was having trouble giving herself some momentum before jumping up the tree. As soon as she'd try to jump, her back paws would slip on the icy snow, even if she had her claws out, and she'd become unbalanced, which prevented her from making a nice, clean jump up the tree.

Once again she tried, but failed for the fifth time. Emberheart's patience was already wearing thin, and the last thing Brookpaw wanted to do was test it again.

"Try spreading your back paws out a little bit," Amberpaw yowled above the wind, "and dig your claws in like you're already doing!"

Brookpaw nodded and backed away from the tree to try again. This time she did as Amberpaw had instructed and spread her toes on her back paws out as she launched herself up the tree. Doing this helped keep her balanced, and allowed her to get the momentum she needed.

Her friend smiled at her from below, though Brookpaw could barely see it through the blowing snow.

"There you go," Emberheart meowed. "Now climb up a little

ways, then we'll call it a day!"

Slowly Brookpaw inched her way up the nearly frozen bark. It hurt her claws, but the possibility of going back to camp and getting out of this freezing weather motivated her to keep going. Soon she'd made it about eight tail-lengths up.

"That's good Brookpaw! You can come down!"

Relieved, the silver tabby was tempted just to jump down. But the fear of getting carried away by the freezing wind kept her from doing so. Instead she carefully inched down the trunk, wincing as her claws hurt more with each movement. *I hope I never really have to do this in an emergency situation*, she thought, trying to avoid biting her tongue as her teeth chattered.

At last she made it to the ground. Thanking StarClan, she looked to Emberheart. "Can we go home now?"

Later that day, Brookpaw found herself curled up in the apprentices den, thinking about the vision Hawkstar had had at the last gathering. He'd told them about it a few days later, probably after counseling with Aspenglow about it. It had been a dark vision, one filled with bloodshed and the howls of furious cats. Hawkstar had taken it as warning—a warning of what might become if ThunderClan wasn't prepared for any possible attacks.

"Who would want to attack us during weather like this?" Grasscloud had asked.

It was Jaysong who answered her. "Someone desperate."

And since that day they had slowly prepared themselves. The barrier of twigs and brush that surrounded the camp was reinforced. All the cats, even the elders, were expected to get out and stretch to help keep in shape during the leaf-bare weather. Hunting patrols were still a priority, which was a problem in a number of ways. First, the fact that they did have to have the patrols so often meant that ThunderClan was beginning to starve.

And when cats began to starve, tempers flared, diseases spread, and thing slowly ebbed away to the forces of chaos. The patrols also meant that a fair number of cats always had to be away from camp, which would be a liability if it was attacked.

Hawkstar and the others were completely aware of this, but the clan had no other options if they wanted to survive leaf-bare.

"Brookpaw!" It was Applefall. The golden tabby stuck her head into the apprentices den, light green eyes hinting at was probably irritation. Irritation had been going around like green-cough this leaf-bare.

The silver tabby jumped to her feet. "What do I need to do?"

Applefall gave her an unreadable look and meowed, "Ravenfoot wants you. Don't keep your mentor waiting."

And then she was gone.

Mouse dung, what was I thinking? I should be out there helping in whatever way I can, not lying around and thinking about visions. Brookpaw dashed out of the den, scanning the camp for Ravenfoot, and, finding him sitting by the gorse tunnel, ran over to him, nearly running over Sageclaw along the way.

"Watch it," the cream-colored she-cat hissed.

"Sorry!"

After coming to a halt in front of her mentor, Brookpaw exclaimed, "Sorry Ravenfoot, I don't know what I was thinking—"

"Settle down," the tom told her, his green eyes shining, "There wasn't anything for you to do. We already have a hunting patrol out, and Hawkstar wants as many cats as possible in the camp. You know that."

Brookpaw looked down at the ground. "I know, but I feel like there's someway I should be helping the clan."

Ravenfoot smiled. "And there is. Hawkstar wants us, Leafstorm,

and Nightpaw to go and patrol the twolegplace border."

"Didn't you just say he wanted to keep as many cats in the camp as possible? And why isn't Applefall coming? She's Nightpaw's mentor."

"I don't know why you're protesting," he mentor meowed in a hushed manner, "when you're the one who's been having suspicions about rogues. And Leafstorm gets along well with Nightpaw. Applefall thought it would be good for him to learn from her as well. He does have a lot to catch up on, if he wants to stay."

Brookpaw held her tongue. Had Ravenfoot told the clan leader about her suspicions? Or did Hawkstar suspect the same as she? The possibility that she'd been worried about the same thing as Hawkstar pleased her slightly, but she didn't let that show.

Smiling, Ravenfoot padded into the gorse tunnel, and Brookpaw followed him.

Leafstorm and Nightpaw joined them on the other side shortly after. Both seemed cheery despite the weather and dull camp life. Brookpaw couldn't help but to notice that the two cats seemed to becoming friends fast, and smiled to herself. She'd only gotten to talk to Nightpaw a few times, despite sharing the same den, but had the general impression that he, although shy, was a nice and hard-working cat. It was good he was making friends, considering that some of the other cats were still judging him for being a kittypet.

"Well, shall we get going?" Ravenfoot asked them all.

"Yes, let's," Leafstorm meowed, "I want to get as far away from camp for as long as I can. I don't know how much longer I can stand all those moping cats."

Brookpaw shot her an amused look.

"Oh, not *everyone* is miserable. But seriously. They act like StarClan has abandoned us or something." The calico's expression darkened for a moment. "Look at me, for example. I could be all pouty and sad because my sister was killed by some ShadowClan

mouse-brain, but I'm not. That doesn't mean I'm not feeling those emotions, but I'm not dishing them out to make everyone else miserable."

"The truth is for me," Nightpaw said so quietly that they all had to lean in closer to hear him, "I'm having the best time of my life. Even being around some grumpy cats is better than spending the leaf-bare alone in the streets of the twolegplace."

Leafstorm licked the top of her friend's head. "It's a good thing you found us."

That comment struck something in Brookpaw's memory. "Hold on a second, Nightpaw. The day you first showed up at our camp. Didn't you say you heard about us from some rogues?"

The black and white tom nodded. "Yeah. They were just saying stupid stuff, about how all the clan cats stole all the prey in the forest and that sort of thing."

"And do you remember what they looked like?"

Now even Ravenfoot was listening intently to the apprentice. Briefly he, Leafstorm, and Brookpaw exchanged a worried glance.

"There was a red she-cat, with longish, glossy fur. And a silver she-cat, with lots of scars."

"Was that all?" Ravenfoot asked, tail twitching.

"No," Nightpaw admitted. "They were both listening to a black tabby tom. Also with longish fur. He seemed to be practicing some sort of speech or something, and was the one making all the comments."

"What color were his eyes?"

Nightpaw began to look worried. "What's wrong? Do you know them?" he asked the black-footed tom.

"Just answer the question."

Still looking concerned, Nightpaw replied, "Blue. Dark blue."

Suddenly, Brookpaw felt exposed, like she was being watched. She whirled around to find that three cats had snuck up on them as they'd gotten sucked into their conversation.

"We have company," she warned, but the others had already noticed.

A red she-cat with bright orange-yellow eyes grinned at them. "It appears you do, apprentice."

They heard a screech sound from somewhere near tallpines.

"It's about time we claim what is rightfully ours, my friends," she told the other rogues. They nodded and grinned as well, their sharp teeth shining as bright as the snow they stood on.

Brookpaw knew they only had moments before they attacked. So she did what she thought was right, and yowled as loud as she could, "ThunderClan is under attack!" Surely the cats in the camp would hear her, and at least be more prepared than they'd been. She could see and smell even more cats joining the original three.

And suddenly a golden tom lunged at her, and the battle began. She somehow managed to dodge him, despite the slippery snow, and had enough time before he tried again to see Leafstorm start to fight a silver she-cat.

"Run!" The calico yowled to Nightpaw. "You're not ready to fight!"

"I can't leave you!"

All Brookpaw's attention was returned to the golden tom as he went to attack her again. He was a muscular cat, but also very large, which meant he had to have more momentum than she did. So if she could attack him before he was set up to attack her...

This time she jumped straight up in the air, avoiding his outstretched claws. She'd taken Amberpaw's advice and had made sure to spread her toes out as she leaped. Landing on top of the

tom, she sunk her teeth into his back. He yowled in anger and pain, and rolled over.

The experience was nearly suffocating, as Brookpaw was pushed down into the snow as his weight went on top of her. If he'd been smart, he would've just stayed there and suffocated her, but the tom made the mistake of getting up. In that moment Brookpaw propelled herself up and swiped her claws across his face.

Blood squirted out from his cheeks and eyes, and briefly she wondered if she'd blinded him. But the rage of battle kept her from stopping to wonder why. She and the others had to keep the rogues from getting into the camp for as long as they could, and if that meant blinding them, then she would do it.

The tom was seriously disabled, but that didn't stop him from being a threat. He whirled around, swiping fiercely at the air, occasionally coming into contact with something. Brookpaw knew she still had work to do. Timing her attack so that it was between his strikes, she charged him, knocking him over into the snow, just like he'd done to her. He struggled underneath her, and, realizing she didn't have much time before managed to get up, Brookpaw began to bury him in snow. Although she knew it probably wouldn't hold him long, it might at least give her some extra time.

Nightpaw, evidently not battling with a cat at the moment, began to help her.

Glancing over her shoulder briefly, Brookpaw saw that ThunderClan cats from the camp had gotten out to help them. Amidst the chaos she managed to spot Snowblaze and Fallingleaf, and even Grasscloud. To her own surprise, she even saw that Shalefire was out fighting.

"You should get out of here," Brookpaw told Nightpaw as they tried to bury the tom.

"And leave my clanmates behind? Isn't that against the warrior code?" He meowed back. "I'm not going anywhere."

She couldn't help but to smile and admire his bravery, but still

she was about to protest for her fear that he would be needlessly killed was growing stronger.

"There you are!" Came the meow if Applefall as she spotted them.

For a moment Brookpaw couldn't tell if she was talking about her or Nightpaw.

"You're doing wonderfully," the golden tabby told her apprentice, "but you still don't have a lot of training." Casually she swiped at a she-cat who had gotten too close to her and continued talking. "And we don't need you being killed. You've already proven yourself worthy for this clan simply by standing your ground. So come with me, quickly. I have one more thing you can do."

At this point Applefall whispered something to Nightpaw, and he nodded and dashed back into the camp.

"We don't have long before they get into the camp," Brookpaw meowed as she scooped one final clump of snow onto the golden warrior.

"I know," her mother replied. "That's why I'm sending him in to help get the elders out."

That must mean they finished the emergency tunnel. Some of the clan cats had been working on an extra tunnel through the gorse near the elders den in case of a situation like this so they elders could get away, if they wanted to.

Brookpaw wanted to reply, but at that moment another rogue tackled her, and this time it was the red she-cat. Applefall tried to intervene but was also attacked by a large calico simultaneously.

The red she-cat was a much better fighter than the golden tom. And, unlike Willowlight, she didn't waste any time making little speeches. Brookpaw supposed she could at least respect that as the cat raked her claws across the silver tabby's side. Like a reflex, she reached up to claw the she-cat's face, but that only seemed to affect her opponent for a second. However, it was a second to be made

the most of. Brookpaw managed to get back on her feet before the she-cat tried to dive under her and dig her claws into the soft fur of her stomach.

Nice try, Brookpaw thought, *but I used that one on Berryfang in the* nursery. With no warning yowl she turned and pounced onto her opponent's side, hoping to knock the breath from her. But the she-cat was quick and managed to jump away just in time.

At that moment a loud shriek came from inside the camp. With horror, Brookpaw realized it was the shriek of her best friend. Swiping at the red cat one last time, she turned and dashed into the camp, realizing she had abandoned her position, but too concerned about Amberpaw to care. *I'm not about to let someone else die.*

A few of the rogues had made it in anyway. One of them was the scarred silver she-cat, who was battling a very disgruntled looking Stormclaw. Jaysong fought at his side, fending off a ginger tom. Emberheart and Minkpelt both looked happier than Brookpaw had ever seen them. Together they slashed and struck at rogues with their claws extended. Nearby, Hawkstar was clashing with a mud-colored tom. *Well, as horrible as this all is, all this fighting is probably a good way for the ThunderClan cats to release their anger*. Brookpaw pushed the thought to the back of her mind and began searching for Amberpaw. She saw a brief flash of red amidst the chaos, but it turned out to be his father, Firelight, instead. But the tom did look like he needed some help, as the rogue he was fighting, a large and angry-looking tabby, was sinking his claws into the red tom's back.

Brookpaw ran as fast as she could and barreled into the tabby, giving Firelight a moment to get up and recover before leaping at the tabby. He nodded to Brookpaw as he did so, and she took that as her cue to continued her search for her friend.

"Amberpaw?!" She yowled, but the sound was swallowed up by the roar of the battle. *Where in StarClan is he?*

"Brookpaw?" Came a faint reply.

He had to be closeby if he'd heard her. Spinning around, the silver tabby finally spotted him. He was cornered by two rogues, a

gray and another tabby, and was trying to attack both of them at once, but failing. Blood seeped down his right ear.

Brookpaw hissed and leapt at the gray, thinking just for a moment that he reminded her of Slywhisker before slashing at his muzzle. Now distracted, the tom turned from Amberpaw to her, leaving just the tabby for her friend to fight. She had to admit he had quick reflexes. Not a second after she swiped at him he'd returned the gesture. Brookpaw felt his claws dig into her cheek, and tasted blood. Letting the pain fuel her, she dove at his hindlegs and sunk her teeth into the closest one. The tom yowled and twisted around to attack her, but the silver tabby simply kicked at him with her own hind legs, claws extended, and sunk her teeth in deeper.

Then, suddenly, it all came to a stop. The chaos. The battle. The noise. All of it. All the cats turned to see what was happening, and the answer was surprisingly simple.

A black cat was strolling across the camp, straight towards Hawkstar. Immediately the ThunderClan leader's ears flattened, and hatred filled his one good eye. *Who was this black cat*? Brookpaw wondered.

"I was afraid you wouldn't stop being a pain," Hawkstar growled. "Why did you come back?"

The black cat grinned. "Well, I couldn't just leave my *favorite* clan behind forever now, could I?"

Some of the rogues chuckled.
Brookpaw looked around the camp at her clanmate's expressions, hoping to find an explanation for all of this. There only seemed to be two expressions; either hatred or confusion, like her. Obviously some of them had met this black cat before.

"How about we settle this, once and for all?" He asked Hawkstar, still grinning as he leapt up onto the Highrock.

Their leader's answer was simple enough. The cream-colored leader hissed and launched himself at the tom. And the fight began. All the while, something was tugging at her thoughts. She'd seen

this black cat, somewhere, somehow. But the rush and the excitement of the battle had taken over her, and recalling anything in great detail seemed hard.

Come on! Remember! She willed herself.

But what happened next made everything clear and unclear at the same time.

Brookpaw was forced to watch in horror as the black tom who had stalked her dreams drove his claws into Hawkstar's throat.

"I've waited far too long for this," he spat, his dark blue eyes gleaming with hatred.

The ThunderClan leader collapsed, dead.

"What now?" The black tom asked them, smiling. "What now that your precious deputy is dead?"

No cat dared to speak. Of course Hawkstar wasn't dead, officially. This was only his second life. And although this cat had obviously been around clan life before, apparently he hadn't been informed that Hawkstar was now the clan leader. Yet he still had a very strong presence, and even Brookpaw found herself watching him intently to see what he would do next.

The black tom looked as if he was going to speak again when a faint moan escaped from Hawkstar's bloodied body.

That was fast.

"I'm afraid it's Hawk*star* now, Darkcloud."

Brookpaw heard the red she-cat she'd been fighting let out a short, sharp hiss. So this tom *had* been a clan cat.

"And I've waited for this day as well," Hawkstar spat.

With a screech, Darkcloud leapt at him, and the two toms began viciously fighting each other, blood pooling from their gorgeous coats. None of the cats dared to move as they battled. No cats

except Applefall.

"That's enough," she meowed, but neither of the toms heard her. "I said that's *enough*!"

Slowly the cats broke apart, glancing down at the dauntless she-cat they'd both loved.

"I will not let you kill each other over a misunderstanding," Applefall continued, light green eyes blazing.

"A *misunderstanding*?" Darkcloud spat at her.

Applefall shook her head. "Oh Darkcloud, come on. Did you really think my *silver tabby* daughter was Hawkstar's?"

Several pairs of eyes came to rest upon Brookpaw. Amberpaw's orange ones were wide, and he for once he gave her no reassuring glance. Brookpaw looked back at them all, wondering which ones had known all along that she was the daughter of a heartless rogue.

She swallowed. In a way, it made sense. She'd known her father was outside of the clans. She'd been having strange dreams about him. But what didn't make sense what how her mother could have cared for this bitter, vicious cat.

Darkcloud's eyes fell upon her. With a shudder, Brookpaw realized they were the same shade of blue as hers. Her father didn't say anything, but there was some vague emotion dancing around in his eyes. Regret?

"*Go*," he commanded.

The force and power behind the command made some of the cats jerk. Who was he referring to? Darkcloud's eyes left her and darted around the camp at the rogues. "I said *go*."

Most of them seemed too shocked to disagree, and they plodded out of the camp. All but the silver she-cat and the red she-cat.

"You said we'd reclaim the forest!" The silver one yowled. "You never said we were just part of your little revenge scheme!"

Darkcloud leapt down from the Highrock and hissed into her scarred face, "Go."

The silver cat's ears pinned back, and she called Darkcloud a very nasty name before turning around and stalking out of the camp. As soon as she was gone, all eyes fell back on Darkcloud and Hawkstar.

"That command should also apply to you," The ThunderClan leader told the black tabby.

Darkcloud looked up at him.

"Although I probably should just kill you at this point," Hawkstar continued, "that is not the way of the warrior code. Do you remember that at all, Darkcloud?"

It was a rhetorical question.

Hawkstar turned to Applefall. "What do you think we should do with him, Applefall?"

The clan cats gave each other looks. *Hawkstar's going to let my mother decide his fate?*

Applefall exchanged a long, emotional look with the cat who used to be her mate. "Like he said, Hawkstar. I think he should go. Somewhere far away from here."

The clan leader nodded. "You heard her Darkcloud."

Both toms seemed to smile for a fraction of a second; Brookpaw couldn't tell if she'd imagined it or not. Then Darkcloud turned and began padding over to her.

Nerves built up inside Brookpaw just as the scowl on Applefall's face did as he got closer. Even Amberpaw tensed as the dark cat stopped right in front of her, looked straight into his daughter's eyes, and whispered one word so quietly only she could hear it.

"Sorry."

Emotions Brookpaw couldn't possibly hope to express boiled inside her, but she didn't even get the chance to try before her father and the mysterious red she-cat darted out of the camp.

Darkcloud was gone.

It was over now.

Chapter Eighteen

[image]

There was an extremely tense and awkward silence after the black tabby exited the camp. Several of the clan cats were glancing from Hawkstar, to Applefall, and then to Brookpaw, unsure of what to do.

But the silver tabby didn't care. She herself was looking at her mother, desperately wanting to ask her how that vicious cat had become her father. But no words came. She was *far* too angry for that.

"What cats are the most wounded?" Came Aspenglow's stern meow, breaking the tense silence.

Stormclaw and Jaysong began pulling a familiar black and white tom over to the medicine cat, as gently as they could. *Shalefire*.

Upon seeing his father and former clan leader so wounded, Snowblaze ran over to help his sister and Stormclaw. His blue and yellow eyes were wide, and he shot Jaysong a look as if to say *Is he dead?*

Brookpaw felt a sick feeling began to churn in her stomach. Her father had caused all this. *Her* father. Would they all hate her now? Would they blame Applefall for all this? The apprentice's thoughts became more irrational by the second.

She felt someone place their tail on her shoulder, as if to comfort her. Brookpaw glanced around, and saw that it was Hawkstar. He stared at her with his green-gold eye, and involuntarily, she shivered.

"This isn't your fault, Brookpaw," he whispered solemnly. "This is the doing of myself and Darkcloud. I should've known better than to think he wouldn't plan revenge."

She blinked at him, grateful that he wasn't mad with her, but still wanting to know more about her father's history with ThunderClan.

"I still don't—" she began, but Hawkstar silenced her with a soft glare.

"Not now," he meowed. "Applefall should tell you in due time." He dipped his head to her and began walking over to the medicine den, where Aspenglow was desperately trying to treat Shalefire.

The silver tabby understood that the former leader's case was more important than her own, but deep in her heart she knew Applefall would still be reluctant to tell her anything. Her mother would still be too ashamed to explain, and Brookpaw knew in that instant that if she ever wanted to know anything about her father, it would have to be from another source. And why couldn't Hawkstar be that source? Didn't she have a right to know about her father, considering he'd inflicted harm upon her clanmates?

She felt something brush her side, and saw that Amberpaw had come over and sat next to her. Their eyes met, and Brookpaw couldn't help but to be grateful for his company. At least *he* wasn't judging her based on her father's actions. A few moments later, Rabbitflight padded over as well, taking a position near her other side. The tom had a gash upon his right cheek, reminding Brookpaw of the long gash the red she-cat had given her on her side. It stung like crazy, but she forced herself to ignore it. Other cats had gotten far worse injuries. They needed to be treated first. The silver tabby touched her tail to both of the toms' shoulders, silently thanking them for their support.

At long last Aspenglow emerged from the medicine den, her expression grim. "I can't save him," she meowed softly, yet it was so quiet in the camp that every cat heard her. "Any cat who wishes to state their final goodbyes, please come forward."

Several of the cats, including Brookpaw inched forward, but they all stopped to let Jaysong and Snowblaze through. All cats but Grasscloud and Hawkstar.

Hawkstar was understandable. He'd been deputy to Shalefire, and

probably wished to get some final advice the former leader, and possibly thank him. But Grasscloud? Brookpaw had no idea why she wanted so desperately to see the black and white tom before he departed for StarClan. Nevertheless, Aspenglow let her through.

And the tense silence began once more.

Brookpaw could hardly stand it. Shouldn't they at least be attempting to do *something*? She felt terrible about the day's events, as they all did, but sitting around when the camp was in shambles and there were still cats with injuries didn't seem quite right to her. None of this seemed right. It wasn't right of Applefall to hide the truth about her father for all this time. It wasn't right that Shalefire was dying. It wasn't right that Darkcloud had taken revenge to this level. It wasn't right that Berryfang and Mistfur had been killed. It wasn't right that RiverClan had become so hostile. It wasn't right that Brookpaw, somewhere deep down, liked Slywhisker more than she should. It wasn't right that she'd been cold to Rabbitflight occasionally. There were so many things she could point out, but what *was* right anymore?

Suddenly Emberheart's quiet yet commanding meow broke the awful tension. "Are there any cats that feel that they are too injured to work?"

No cat spoke up.

"Excellent. Amberpaw, Brookpaw, and Rabbitflight, please go find the elders and return with them to camp. If you have even the slightest amount of trouble with any rogues that might be out there, call for help. We'll have a team of cats working on the barrier that will be nearby."

The three young cats nodded, then turned to make their way out of the camp. *At least doing this will help distract my mind for a while, as well as help the clan*, Brookpaw thought to herself. She caught Applefall's gaze as she passed. Her mother's green eyes bored into her own for a moment before the golden-brown tabby walked over to the trio.

"And keep an eye out for Nightpaw," she told them. "He was sent to

help the elders."

"Will do, Applefall," Rabbitflight replied. He looked around at his comrades. "Let's get going, shall we?"

Brookpaw nodded, but her mind was elsewhere as she looked at her mother. Was Applefall just trying to protect her from her father in some weird way, like Amberpaw had thought? Or was she really just too embarrassed to tell her about her mistake?

Amberpaw placed his paw gently on the silver tabby's shoulder, silently telling her to leave it alone for now. When she looked into his orange-yellow eyes, his expression seemed to say *come on, we've got work to do.*

Brookpaw took a deep breath. Then she nodded. He was right. Now was not the time to be caught up in personal issues. They had a clan to look after.

"The emergency tunnel lead out towards the Owl-Tree," Rabbitflight meowed, "it's likely that we'll find the elders and Nightpaw there."

"When we were digging it, I felt like a WindClan cat. I don't know how a cat can spend so much time underground," Amberpaw remarked as they trotted through the undergrowth.

Brookpaw rolled her blue eyes at them. "It's not as if all the WindClan cats tunnel. The others run the moors. And it's their way of life. I'm sure they'd be just as uncomfortable in our forest."

"No, I wasn't trying to say they were wrong to tunnel, I-I just couldn't imagine doing it myself all the time," the reddish tom replied, sounding embarrassed.

The silver tabby couldn't help but to smile. She caught up to her friend and placed her tail on his shoulder. "It's fine, Amberpaw, relax."

Up ahead of them, Rabbitflight snorted.

"What's so funny?" Brookpaw meowed to him.

"If I was acting so casual after such a battle, I'm sure both of you would've pounced on the opportunity to scold me. Yet here you two are, chirping like content little songbirds, after a band of rogues just attacked our camp."

Brookpaw couldn't say he was wrong. But if she was going to put her personal issues aside, then she wasn't going to think about the battle, considering it had been *her* father who started it, and *her* mother who was hiding secrets. So chatting about something else was her way of distracting her mind from those thoughts. Amberpaw seemed to understand that without asking, but Rabbitflight evidently hadn't picked up on her cues. Which was alright. They all had issues of their own after the battle.

"You're absolutely right," she said to the white and orange tom.

There was a pause. "Well, I certainly never expected you to tell me *that*."

"And I know I'm not the only one, but I feel like a pile of mouse dung. I mean, apparently my father is a bitter, vicious cat that was exiled from the Clan. And, not only that, but he and the red she-cat recruited a bunch of rouges to attack my clanmates because he thought that I was *Hawkstar's* kit, not his, and I feel like the whole thing is my fault." She took a breath. "But I'm trying not to think about that, because I have a clan who needs help, and I'm *not* going to put my personal issues above the clan, like my father."

The silver tabby barely realized she'd stopped moving, and that the two toms had stopped to turn and look at her.

"But if I think directly about the clan's current problems, I start thinking about my father, and Applefall, and I *really* need to focus on something else. I apologize for sounding unconcerned."

Rabbitflight's eyes clouded. "Oh Brookpaw..." He didn't finish the sentence, but immediately perked up and exclaimed, "I have wondered what it would be like to tunnel for long periods of time. Imagine getting used to the closed spaces and the darkness..."

"I'd never make it," Amberpaw added. "I'd have to run the moors instead."

Brookpaw purred slightly. She was very lucky to have them both as friends, and wondered if she truly deserved that friendship. The three of them became absorbed in the conversation as they padded through the snow and leaveless brush, not stopping until they reached the Owl-Tree.

"There's the tunnel exit," Amberpaw meowed, gesturing near a particularly dense patch of brush.

The exit must have been nearly covered by snow before, as clusters of the white substance looked as if it had been pushed aside as cats exited from the tunnel. Paw prints were visible, and Brookpaw could faintly detect the scents of Dustscar, Duskpelt, and Nightpaw. The silver tabby breathed a sigh of relief. They'd made it here.

The scents lead to another thick patch of brush just beyond the Owl-Tree. The warrior and the two apprentices glanced at each other, then Rabbitflight meowed, "It's Rabbitflight, Brookpaw, and Amberpaw. The battle is over. It's safe to come back to camp."

Shuffling could be heard from inside the brush.

"You don't have to tell us your names, mouse-brains, we could recognize you by your scent," came the indignant meow of Duskpelt, "Just because we are old doesn't mean we can't smell."

Brookpaw grinned. "Hello Duskpelt."

Nightpaw emerged first, his yellow eyes wide with concern. "What happened back at the camp? Is anyone hurt?"

"Shalefire is dying," Amberpaw replied softly, "But no else is as seriously injured as him."

The black and white tom's ears drooped slightly. He looked as if he was about to say something else when Duskpelt emerged from the brush behind him, pushing the apprentice out of the way. "Back in my younger days, apprentices moved *quicker* than the elders. Quit standing around in the way." Her whiskers twitched, and Nightpaw

apologized and went to stand by Brookpaw, looking ashamed.

"Don't take it too personally," the silver tabby whispered to him, "she doesn't mean any harm."

His expression darkened for a moment, then became attentive as Duskpelt spoke again.

"Did I hear that Shalefire was itchin' to join StarClan already?" she asked, stepping aside to let Dustscar pass her. Her tail was swishing agitatedly. "*I'm* older than him and I haven't joined the cats up in the sky yet."

"He fought in the battle," Brookpaw murmured, trying to defend the former clan leader. "And if you want to see him before he 'joins the cats up in the sky', we'd all better get back to camp as quickly as possible."

Duskpelt gave the apprentice a surprised look. Usually the two of them were on good terms, but the anger had been evident in Brookpaw's mew. Slowly the old she-cat nodded. "Then let's get going."

The trip back to the camp was surprisingly fast-paced. They'd decided not to use the emergency tunnel, as most of the cats seemed uncomfortable about the idea, and instead weaved back through the undergrowth until they came to the gorse tunnel. Lilystream, who was already working on repairing the gorse barrier, bounded over to them, her purplish eyes bright and shining.

"Go on down into the camp," she encouraged.

Rabbitflight tilted his head at his sister, slightly confused, just as they all were.

"Just do it," the white and orange she-cat exclaimed, and retreated back to continue her work.

"We were going down there *anyway*," Dustscar mumbled under his breath.

Brookpaw and the others exchanged glances, and then entered the gorse tunnel. She could hear Duskpelt's wheezing breaths as they crawled through it, but the gray tabby made no complaints. Feeling slightly sorry, Brookpaw slowed the pace a little until they emerged from the tunnel.

What they saw was not what they expected.

The cats were still wounded and battered, but the whole atmosphere that engulfed the clan had changed. Instead of being weary, depressed, and angry, the cats seemed...*Happy*? Brookpaw thought. *What happened*?

"*Surely* you all aren't celebrating the death of Shalefire," Duskpelt exclaimed loudly, so that several of the cats turned and looked at her.

Brookpaw heard a chuckle, and turned to see Hawkstar striding over to them. "No, Duskpelt, in fact, it's quite the opposite."

Amberpaw's mouth gaped. "Are you saying—"

The ThunderClan leader nodded.

"But *how*?"

"It seems that StarClan left Shalefire with one more life than we all thought," Hawkstar explained, his gold-green eye shining.

Brookpaw glanced over at the medicine den. Aspenglow was rushing Stormclaw inside, looking extremely grumpy. *No, not grumpy*, the silver tabby decided. Irritated. And not pretend irritated. *Really* irritated. Wouldn't she be happy about Shalefire's recovery?

And then it hit her. Already Hawkstar had recieved one less life as a leader when Shalefire resigned while he was still alive. If Shalefire had still had one extra life, that meant Hawkstar had only recieved seven lives. And already two of them had been used. The clan leader must have hid this fact from all of them, even the medicine cat. And now she knew the truth, and was infuriated that Hawkstar had neglected to tell her this.

Brookpaw's tail began to twitch as she thought more and more. Why had Shalefire still had an extra life? Surely StarClan hadn't messed up on accident—her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden anouncement from Hawkstar.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey please gather beneath the Highrock for a clan meeting!" He yowled, causing even more waves of excitement and curiosity to pass through the clan cats.

Brookpaw assumed he was going to discuss the events of the days, and state what he planned to do about it, but she was shocked when instead he looked down from his perch—directly at her.

"Brookpaw, please step forward."

The apprentice felt her pulse quicken and her eyes widen. *Is this actually happening*? She glanced up at Hawkstar, and then to Applefall, who gave her a small nod. The golden-orange tabby's chest was swollen with pride, and, just for a moment, Brookpaw forgot about the tension between them as she stepped forward to recieve her warrior name.

"Brookpaw," Hawkstar meowed again, "You fought bravely today, and while doing so aided several of your clanmates, showing that even in the heat of battle, you still put your clanmates first. Ravenfoot has done well as your mentor. You have earned your place as a warrior in ThunderClan."

Brookpaw's own chest swelled with pride, yet had to look away from Hawkstar's intense gaze, slightly embarrassed as he complimented her.

"But—"

The apprentice held her breath. Had she done something wrong? Was Hawkstar going to bring up Darkcloud?

"I would like to say something to you and to all the cats of ThunderClan before I give you your warrior name."

There was murmur among the cats, but it was silenced as Hawkstar began again.

"I would like to say that there is a lesson that can be learned from today's events. Be careful when making your decisions. Consider them from all angles before you decide what to do. Because poor decisions..." he paused, taking the time to make eye contact with every cat in the clearing, "Poor decisions often have awful consequences."

Was he referring to himself and Darkcloud? Applefall? Darkcloud's decision to attack his former clanmates before he knew all the facts? Brookpaw wasn't sure. Perhaps he was referring to all three. *And, on that happy note, he's going to make me a warrior.*

"Now, on to more cheerful matters," Hawkstar meowed.

Yup, I was right.

"Brookpaw, do you vow to honor and follow the warrior code, and to continue to put your clan before your self?"

She swallowed, excitement and nerves building up inside her. "I do."

"Then your warrior name shall be Brookleap. ThunderClan honors your loyalty and perseverance."

"*Brookleap*! *Brookleap*!" the clan cheered. The silver tabby thought she could pick out Rabbitflight's and Amberpaw's yowls from the bunch.

The clan leader agilely leapt down the Highrock and set his muzzle atop her head. "I wish you luck with your vigil. And be sure to have Aspenglow look at that wound before you begin," he told her before stepping back and letting the other cats congratulate her.

"It's about time, Furball," Rabbitflight meowed, grinning. "Now you'll be hanging with the *real* cats."

Amberpaw shot him a look.

"Just kidding, calm your fur, Amber."

The red apprentice rolled his eyes. "Aw, now you'll be leaving the

apprentice den. You won't ditch me, will you?"

Thanks guys, ask me all this stuff when I can't speak. She shook her head, smiling slightly.

Amberpaw, as usual, seemed to pick up on her cue. "Hey, Rabbitflight, let's bother her when she can actually *speak*, okay?"

The white and orange tom smirked at him. "*Fine*, we'll leave her alone. Congratulations, Brook*leap*." He gave her another goofy feline grin and waded out into the crowd of dispersing cats.

Amberpaw shook his head and stepped over to her. "Congratulations, you earned it." He paused, as if thinking for a moment. "And thank you for helping me today, during the battle."

You would've done the same for me, she thought, and smiled at him as if to say *no problem*. Her friend purred and rubbed his head against her shoulder. "Don't fall asleep," he warned.

Brookleap swatted his ear playfully and watched as he walked away, turning back once to grin at her. Rolling her eyes, she turned and saw that Applefall was coming over to her now. The sick feeling that her mother had hidden the truth from her for all these moons returned, and she looked away briefly.

Applefall didn't say anything. She simply licked the top of Brookleap's head, and in that moment the silver tabby was reminded of being in the nursery, back when life was simpler. *If only now could be that simple*, she thought as she gazed into her mother's light green eyes. For a moment she dared hope that Applefall might tell her something about Darkcloud, but that hope was extinguished when the golden-tabby instead placed an herb at her daughter's feet and strode away into the increasing darkness.

Well, Applefall would be Applefall. Brookleap would have to get her answers somewhere else.

Trying to distract herself, she applied the herb to her wound, then crept over to the entrance to the gorse tunnel, silently watching as the rest of the clan cats receded into their dens. The clouds were

starting to clear up, and the starlight was shining brightly onto the white crystals of snow. Cool air swept across Brookleap's fur, and in that moment it was hard to believe the earlier events of the day had been so awful. Once again she tried to suppress those thoughts, when another struck her—if she kept trying to hide what had happened, she'd be no better than Applefall.

So she let herself relive what had happened.

Darkcloud lead an attack against my clanmates. He turned out to be my father. He took one of Hawkstar's lives. Applefall stopped their fighting. Darkcloud called off his rogues when he realized I was his daughter...

Brookleap pondered it all, but especially the last thought. It was evident that Darkcloud was a bitter and vicious cat, and was extremely jealous of Hawkstar. But he'd made a mistake—and accepted that. He'd called off the rogues. And then he'd let them all be.

Did that make him a good cat?

No, Brookleap decided. But it didn't make him completely evil either.

She let out a breath, once again gazing up at the stars. It was no mystery now as to who the dark cat who'd prowled her dreams was. Knowing that, at least, gave her a little peace. And she smiled.

Epilogue

[image] [image]

The sweet smell of new-leaf wafted through the air as Brookleap stepped back into the ThunderClan camp. Morning rays of sunlight struck the slightly frosted ground and the pelts of a few drowsy cats.

The silver tabby purred slightly when her eyes fell upon the nursery. Just outside the entrance, Grasscloud's two new kits, Robinkit and Blossomkit, were tumbling around in a ball of dark brown and black fur.

"Get off me!" Robinkit exclaimed, trying to push his sister away, but the little black she-kit only smirked and leapt at him again.

She has determination, I'll give her that, Brookleap thought to herself, and purred some more.

Grasscloud had chosen not to reveal who the kits' father was, though she has assured them he was *not* a former clan cat bent on revenge. Some cats thought they may be the kits of a kittypet tom, but Brookleap wasn't falling for that. Grasscloud, though a nice cat, just didn't have the determination to walk all the way to the twolegplace. She was unlike her first son in that manner.

Yet another purr rumbled in the silver tabby's throat as she spotted Rabbitflight and Ambereyes returning from their morning patrol with Sageclaw and Leafstorm. Ambereyes, like he'd predicted, had indeed been named after his lovely yellow-orange eyes, and had only become a warrior within the last quarter moon. Brookleap was glad to have him around again. She'd hated being seperated from him by rank, just as she'd hated being a kit when Rabbitflight had been an apprentice all those moons ago.

"Hey, what's up?" She called to them, beginning to pad over to her two friends.

Rabbitflight looked grumpy. "We found traces of RiverClan scent at Sunningrocks again."

Hadn't Crowstar and Hawkstar come to an agreement about that? "How much?" She asked.

"Actually, not a whole lot," Leafstorm replied, "Just one cat or so. We decided that if we find more soon, we'll raise the alert, but if the cat doesn't return, there's no need to cause any trouble."

Brookleap nodded. That sounded reasonable. It was amazing how reasonable Leafstorm was compared to how Berryfang had been. "I could check it out some more, if you want," she offered. "I was planning on hunting today, and I could head in that direction."

"If you want, but it's not necessary," Sageclaw meowed.

Swishing her tail slightly, she nodded again. "I'll go. It can't hurt."

The older warrior nodded and made her way over to where Hawkstar was sitting. *Probably to tell him the news.* The thought of another incident with RiverClan made Brookleap's fur bristle. ThunderClan had been lucky enough not to have another incident since Darkcloud's return, and the last thing they needed was to reopen the old wound with the neighboring clan.

"You want me to come with you?" Ambereyes asked, strolling up to her. His reddish coat was glinting in the golden light.

Brookleap was about to agree when suddenly she felt the presence of another cat behind her. She smirked. "Hello, Ravenfoot."

Her old mentor purred. "Actually, Brookleap, I was hoping to borrow your friend for the day, if you wouldn't mind."

The silver tabby and Ambereyes turned to face him, their heads tilted.

"Why are you asking *me* this?" She replied, "Ambereyes can speak for himself."

Ravenfoot continued to smirk at them, his green eyes shining

mischievously. "Whatever you say. I need some more help burying the escape tunnel."

Her friend's eyes widened, as did Brookleap's. She knew how much her friend hated being in tunnels. "Why are you burying it? It was effective, wasn't it?"

"Hawkstar put me in charge of slowly filling it back in. With all the water seeping into the soil from the melting snow, it's obvious that the tunnel will be hard to maintain. It was a good idea, but not good enough to keep."

"But why me?" Ambereyes asked. "Not that I'm trying to get out of work..."

Ravenfoot's tail swished. "Because you, Ambereyes, are well known for your growing fear of being underground. Most of us know about your journey into Mothermouth by now."

Brookleap grimaced. About a moon ago, Snowblaze had taken Ambereyes on his first trip to the Moonstone. Rumor had it that her friend had freaked out underground and run back outside to the moor. It had taken some serious coaxing from his mentor to get him back inside. Ambereyes hadn't willingly told her the story, but if Ravenfoot was talking about it, chances were it was true.

"It's a fear you need to see if you can eliminate," Ravenfoot continued. "Though it is understandable. For most cats, being underground is extremely stressful. Which gives you a huge advantage if you *aren't* stressed out."

Brookleap frowned at him. "I wasn't very comfortable going down Mothermouth, and you never made me go back underground."

"Yes Brookleap, but you didn't stress out so much that you gave in and ran. You were able to control your fear. Though it wouldn't be a *bad* idea to have you help me sometime too."

Ambereyes let out a long breath. "Okay, let's go do this before I talk myself out of this."

The black-legged tom grinned. "That's the spirit." He placed his tail

on the young tom's shoulder. "You'll be fine." Ravenfoot began to pad away, heading over to the camp entrance to the tunnel.

Brookleap smiled at her friend. "Yes, you will be. Go. I'll be fine."

"Of course you will."

It was nearly midday now, and Brookleap had successfully caught a robin, two mice, and a squirrel. It was nice to enjoy new-leaf as a warrior, instead of having to try to sneak out of the camp as a kit. She smiled at the memory, and became momentarily lost in thought.

Until she detected movement, just beyond the trees. At Sunningrocks.

"*Mouse dung*," she cursed, and started creeping out into the open. *How many times do we have to fight over these stupid rocks*? Once she got close enough, she leapt up onto the nearest rock, ready to face whoever it was.

But no cat was there. Even the scent was muffled.

Their swim across the river must have washed away their scent.

She leapt to the next rock. And the next. And the next. There was still no sign of a cat. *Maybe I was imagining things*. And that's when she heard a soft chuckle from behind her.

"Hello darling, did you miss me?" Slywhisker purred, smirking.

Brookleap whirled on him. "*Hardly*." She proceeded to shove the dark gray tom so hard that he fell back into the river.

"And stay in there!" She yowled, her fur bristling up once more. The she-cat couldn't deny that it felt nice to get revenge, but at the same time she actually felt slightly sorry about shoving him. *Why in StarClan would I feel sorry for him? He's RiverClan! He's used to the water. And at least I was nice enough to push him in when the water wasn't* freezing.

Slowly (yet gracefully), Slywhisker dragged himself out on the opposite shore. "As you wish, Brookleap." He smirked at her, his silver eyes shining, then bounded off into RiverClan territory.

Brookleap couldn't deny that she was flustered. Why did the irritating yet charming tom have such a profound effect on her? It was annoying, especially considering Slywhisker seemed to be so amused by her reactions. Yet the silver tabby found herself staring out at the place the tom had stood before he'd disappeared. *Wake up, Brookleap, you've got fresh-kill to pick up*. Shaking her head, she bounded off back towards the ThunderClan forest.

With any luck, Sageclaw would still be around to report to. And, once she got that done, she could go check on Ambereyes, and even join him and Ravenfoot.

Yes, that would be just fine.

ThunderClan, here I come.

THE END

A Message

Hi everyone,

To be quite honest, it's unlikely I will ever write a sequel or prequel, even if I have vague ideas in my head. I'm not saying it will never happen, but please don't pressure me into writing them. I know those that do probably ask out of enthusiasm, but it doesn't make me want to write them more.

I do want to thank everyone who has read this and say that I hope you enjoyed it. I didn't write this in order to try and have it be popular, I just wanted to tell a story and I appreciate it so much that others have gotten invested in it.

Another thing I want to address is Slywhisker. I used to like him and Brook as a ship, but his interaction with her (I realize I wrote it) doesn't sit well with me anymore. I think he's an interesting character, but if I do ever write another installment SlyBrook is going to end because it was a bit toxic on different levels.

Again, thank you all so much,

Halfshadows6

Fun Facts

I got a request to list some facts/info that may not be stated officially in this story, but are actually canon (probably). A few things might not match up, because sometimes I added them after I wrote the main story and haven't taken the time to properly edit Storm Clouds.

However, without further ado, here are some fun facts!

- Shalestar/Shalefire is the father of Snowblaze and Jaysong. His mate's name was Echofrost (love that name). Unfortunately, she was killed by a wolf.

- Sageclaw had a sister, Thornberry, who is Ravenfoot's mother. Berryfang is named after her.

- Dustscar is the father of Grasscloud, and therefore the grandfather of Ambereyes.

- Whiteflower is Slywhisker and Silvershine's mother—their father was a rogue.

- Firelight is the brother of Redpool, who was Hawkstar's mother (I think this was mentioned).

- Applefall had two brothers (elaboration would be a spoiler).

- This story is based off of a terrible fanfic I wrote when I was eight or nine.

- In this terrible fanfic Ambereyes was originally named Autumneyes—which doesn't make sense because the warrior cats don't use the term autumn.

- Shalestar/fire, Hawkfeather/star, Stormclaw, Rabbitflight, Breezepaw, Crowstar, Sootclaw, Nettleclaw, Bigbelly, Smokestar, Brightfang, Swiftpaw, Minnie/Nightpaw, and Curly (though she

never appeared in the story) are all based on real cats I've known at some point. Feel free to ask about them :)

I'll probably add more at later points...